



REJECTED  
QUEEN  
A VERY STONE

# REJECTED QUEEN

SHATTERED DESTINY OF ALEXANDRA WELF



INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

⚡ **A VERY STONE** ⚡

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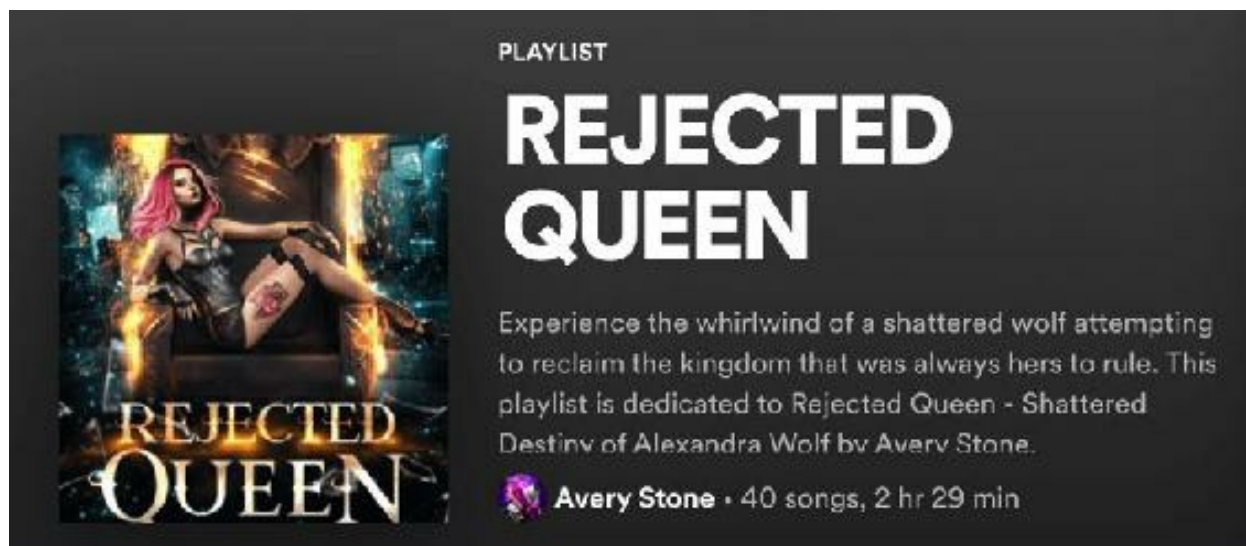
ABOUT AVERY STONE

Also By Avery Stone



*“I will be the Executer! I will live for our kind to live on! I will one day sit upon the very throne that was burned today!  
**I will be your Inferno Queen!”***

## REJECTED QUEEN PLAYLIST



### Do you like playlists?

Listen to this Spotify Playlist dedicated to this series. Trust me, it heightens the experience. Now enjoy.

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/5ef0XAXPjSORgvor8KFX9N?si=fe545b19de104108>

**XOXO**

*Avery S.*



## REJECTED QUEEN BLURB

*His lips finish devouring yours, leaving you speechless.  
Mere seconds ago, you were complete strangers, but now, under the  
moonlight, he's everything to you: friend, lover, partner in all things  
dangerous in these lands of shadows and deceit.*

***You trust him.***

*He looks into your eyes, anticipation building as your lips are centimeters  
from his. All you need is his answer, the words that will make you  
his...forever.*

*He smiles with grace and whispers,*

***“I reject you.”***

Heart shattered, you watch him walk away with his devil's grin, knowing you'll be broken for eternity while he moves on to another deemed worthier. Little does he know that a crown sits heavily on your head, one that gives you power, control, and the opportunity for you to meet him again.

Today you're spurned and forgotten, but that won't be the case forever. You'll rise from the ashes and sit upon the throne he's desperate to claim.

***You won't be a Rejected Queen forever.***



## PROLOGUE: REJECTED QUEEN

*"Alexandra Wolf."*

Never in my twenty years of life would I ever think my name could be said in such a delicate manner. The effect it delivered was hypnotic. My mind was swamped with so many emotions that were desperate to tangle themselves with this stranger and fall in love with the melody that serenaded the halls of our castle.

*It was just us.*

Streams of moonlight shimmered through the glass windows, accenting the extravagant golden dress that donned my slim frame and matched the golden crown with emeralds and pink diamonds that decorated my ravishing body.

My long pink locks had been braided just to emphasize the royal status I'd claimed mere minutes ago, before my family, friends, and fellow people that now looked to me to make the next decisions after this night of celebrations was long gone.

My orange eyes twinkled as they stared into this man's evergreen ones, and for a second, I could see so much in those orbs.

Hopes, dreams, emotions I knew within my soul he'd never allow another to know dwelled within him.

No matter the blaring reality that he stood within the shadows while I

stood in the midst of the moonlight, I couldn't stop the urge to soak him all in - his tall, slim frame, the softness of his porcelain skin, the rich beauty of his frost blue hair with a hint of white strands, and the intense chillness that vibrated out of his very being.

He felt so opposite to me with my temperature of intense heat, my skin a tanned complexion due to the long days in the glorious sun, my neon pink strands with hints of white ends and tiny black roots, and the fierceness that burned in the hollows of my eyes.

*Versus his, which held an intense level of mystery that I was desperate to solve.*

When he initiated the first step forward, my body hummed in delight at our closeness. I couldn't control my movements as I took a nervous step forward. My initiation encouraged him to take the final step between us, and neither of us could ignore the palpable power thrumming through our connection.

He moved swiftly, so quickly that my eyes couldn't grasp what was going on until it was already happening. His arm hooked around my waist and pressed me against him.

Lips smashed into mine with pure hunger, and my eyes widened at the realization that my first kiss was being taken captive by this man I'd just met.

The guards would be here soon, their presence during the after-party a clear must, and yet here I stood, bathed within the glorious rays of the Moon Goddess we praised and served, kissing the fated mate she molded just for me.

I was afraid to kiss him back, to encourage this thrilling touch of pleasure that left my body tingling with happiness, but my body was on a different plane than my mind, and before I knew it, I was returning the kiss with my own inexperienced lips.

He couldn't stop the growl of defiance that thrummed against his throat, his kiss only intensifying and leaving me gasping for breath. He took every

advantage of my novice mistake, his tongue darting inward and taking complete control of this mesmerizing experience.

Our breaths were shallow, and my hands clung to his black shirt. Everything felt like it was spinning, and yet the crash of heat and frigid cold from him came together perfectly.

His lips finished devouring mine, and I was left speechless and out of breath. My mind was whirling with so many thoughts and emotions that it was hard to bear, and yet I was filled with exhilaration that I'd been given this opportunity to find my royal mate.

Mere seconds ago, we were complete strangers, but now, under the moonlight, he meant everything to me. He was a friend, a lover, a partner who would keep me safe from all things dangerous in our lands of shadows and deceit.

*I...trust him.*

He looked into my eyes, and the anticipation built once more as our lips were desperate to come together again. My ears craved to hear those final words - the answer that would make me his forever.

The way he smiled lightened up his face, but I watched those evergreen orbs of mystical wonder begin to cloud, a misty haze brewing and burying the man that had blossomed the moment our eyes locked upon one another's.

*The gaze that triggered our ceremonial bond.*

That smile made a chill run through me, because even though I knew nothing of this man, it was clear that his expression didn't reach his eyes.

With one final look into my eyes that expressed my pleading concern, he whispered, "***I reject you.***"

My mind struggled to comprehend what he had just stated, but his body went forward with his declaration as a chill of frost rushed through me from the inside out.

My legs buckled, and it felt like my body couldn't possibly hold me any longer. I expected him to let me drop to the floor like shattered glass, but he

caught me and lifted me up completely.

"How inconvenient."

He was moving as quickly as he had earlier, and I was struggling to overcome the frost that was fighting to make me succumb entirely. The flames within me worked overtime to rush to my aid and warm my temperature before this chilled force reached my heart, but I took a different route, directing the heat to the core of my chest.

I couldn't think about how my very heart felt like it was beginning to crack along the surface, the growing hollowness and heaviness of those three words beginning to settle through me.

From the curse that left his lips, I wondered if he was feeling the growing internal despair that I was, but suddenly I was lowered onto a stone bench. I needed a moment to just breathe, but I forced my eyes to open as I gritted my teeth and looked up as he took a step back.

He couldn't hide his anguish, but like a flip of a switch, there was a devil's grin, one that mocked me like I was the fault of this whole ordeal. Those spheres that previously showed compassion were now as cold as stone.

Without a single word, he turned around and began to walk away. My heart shattered there and then as if watching him depart without my hand in his was the final straw needed to completely ruin me.

The pain was indescribable. My vision grew blurrier by the second as I acknowledged that his black suit coat was absent. Tattoos of tribal markings ran down his bare arms, and my mind slowly realized he'd been wearing a short sleeve black shirt beneath his jacket.

It shouldn't have mattered when I was trying to survive the shortness of breath that fought to consume me, but it did because those tattoos weren't just normal decorative pieces.

*They were symbols of loyalty to our kingdom's enemy.*

His departure ignited a boom from behind me, and I flinched while the very ground shook beneath me. I fought against every strand of power that

tried to cripple me, my determination growing as screams and cries for help began to echo all around me.

I rushed to stand, but my legs gave way again, forcing me to fall to the ground, which continued to shake like an earthquake was upon us. The screams only heightened, but the scorching heat that hit me in waves was what pushed me to look over my shoulder.

***Fire...***

The flames that I'd been taught to tame by my professors, the warmth that had kept us comfortable during the harshest winters, the element that I'd adored and could call to my very fingertips, now claimed the kingdom - my home - in a spiraling blaze.

"No." The single word left my trembling lips as my eyes further widened. I couldn't fathom how any of this was happening, and yet all I could think about was the pain coursing through my shell. The depths of my agony from being rejected by the one destined for me was all-consuming.

*Was he the one who caused this calamity? Was he truly...my enemy?*

"I need to help," I whispered to myself, and with every gathered thread of power within me, I fought against my weak, shaky legs and rose up. My gaze darted from left to right, taking in my surroundings: the back of the castle that lead to the forest.

I rushed forward to the bridge pathway, but another intense explosion burst before my very eyes. My scream was ear-splitting as I was pushed back by the force that sent me down on my back. I hissed in pain before a growl left my lips. My wolf was wide awake and ready to surpass the protective walls of my mind to aid me in this new conquest.

Scrambling to my feet once more, I outstretched my hands and concentrated. This was the element I could tame, and though my own mate had just broken me and deemed me a worthless fool with his mere dismissal, I couldn't allow myself to cower when my people needed me.

*My kingdom needs me!*

“ALEXIS!” I turned my head to my left, watching as my younger brother came into view on the top ledge of the west tower. The flames were already spreading, the smoke reaching high in the sky, but his pleading eyes sought mine as he shook his head.

“RUN! They’re after you! After the crown! Mother said to ru-” His words were cut off by the ringing sound of a gunshot, and I screamed at the sight. My baby brother lowered his head to look at his chest, at a hole that began to bleed and stain his golden dress shirt.

He returned his gaze to me, and it didn’t matter the distance, I could already see the light that shone so vividly in his sunset orbs beginning to fade away. His mouth moved slowly, but the sound of his voice couldn’t be heard over the crackling of the flames growing bigger and stronger.

It didn’t matter because I caught onto every mouthed word.

***“May the Goddess of our Moon bless you, Queen Wolf. I love you.”***

A man came from behind him, but my brother didn’t wait for his sacred life to be stolen by someone who knew nothing of his heritage. He would do the noble act that was protocol for the royals of our kingdom.

*Take his life.*

For that, all he needed was to lean forward, his eyes still locked upon me while a tender smile formed on his pale face. His body fell right over, and I watched the entirety of his fall until its crashing conclusion into the body of the calm river that consumed him.

The cloaked man in black’s gaze looked below, and I could see the burning rage that overtook his gleaming red eyes.

*Then those venomous eyes of blood locked onto my shocked ones.*

Fear consumed me as a smile of glistening grace formed on the man’s lips before he lifted his black mask and retreated into the flaming smoke that was overtaking the tower.

*He’s coming after me.*

The sound of the safety turning off from a handgun halted me from

making any sort of movements. I swallowed the forming lump in my throat before I dared to slowly turn around to see who was behind me.

There stood a cloaked man in all black, his face masked, like the rest of his body. But no one could mistake those eyes.

*Spheres of evergreen that made my heart shatter once more.*

I wouldn't dare allow him to see me cower this time around. My back straightened further as my hands gripped the golden fabric of my dress to clench until my knuckles were surely white.

His emotionless eyes met mine, but this time, they held not a hint of pleading remorse. They were filled with intense hatred as tears raced down my cheeks. This man had made my heart swim with more happiness than my own Royal Ceremony, and now he'd shattered me while my kingdom was currently burning down in flames.

I'd witnessed the death of my younger brother, and I was almost certain that my family I cherished wouldn't survive if the flames spread any further.

*My future now lay in the hands of this stranger, my mate who rejected me and now had every right to pull the trigger.*

I didn't know why the single word came out of my mouth, but I couldn't stop it.

“Please.”

It was the only pleading grace I'd grant myself as death was clearly knocking upon my door. The longer I stood here, the easier it was to grasp that I'd lost everything I'd loved: my family, my friends, my very home. Now my mate was about to steal away my flaming light.

Dying here would be a sorrowful ending to what I thought would ignite a blazing tale of a queen who was ready to bring change to our outdated throne. To bring a new destiny to our kingdom of Inferno wolves and remind the world about our grand existence.

*Yet, it was too late now.*

I never thought of death, nor did I wish to perish now. Reaching the grand



age of twenty should have ignited a web of adventure, connections, and growth, but now I stood here at my weakest in front of a man who knew nothing about my past or present.

*He's even going to steal my future.*

With a bite of my lip, I moved as swiftly as I could at a pace that shocked the man who held my life in his gun-filled hand. A small knife that I always carried with me was now at my throat. If I should die, I'd be just like my little brother and finish the deed myself.

For a split second, there was that flood of emotion in his eyes, the piercing fear of what I was about to do overcoming his desire to finish me himself. This was my final moment. But then I watched as he lifted his arm and pierced the sky with three solid shots.

The crackling flames grew louder while a gust of wind rushed around us, bringing in a thick cloud of smoke that seemed to cover our surroundings.

***“Run.”***

There was that commanding, deep voice of his that had taken my breath away moments earlier. Only now, it pushed me to move. I passed him and rushed over the stone bridge towards the forest.

Holding the fabric of my gown, I ran as fast as my weak legs could take me, and time swept away from me while my tears continued to flood my eyes and pour down my flushed cheeks. I ran for as long as I could, following my instincts as my wolf aided me to find safety somewhere.

*Anywhere away from the possibility of facing death once more.*

A night of nonstop running left me utterly exhausted, to the point that I was dragging my heeled feet through the mud. From my brief observation, it was clear that I'd reached higher ground - a cliff was a few short steps away from me.

The sun was rising - another significant sign that many hours had passed since I'd fled the scene - and its gleaming rays of orange and warmth attempted to comfort the shrill anguish beating through my poor shattered

heart.

With the last strings of strength, I ventured to the very edge of the cliff, and there I was able to witness the vast view below and beyond. I'd thought my heart couldn't be weighed down with even more agony, but the sight before my eyes did exactly that and more as my eyes trailed the floating path of smoke that lingered in the glowing sky.

The kingdom of endangered people, the sheltered creatures of burning flames that lived in peace and harmony for centuries in this guarded land were no more. The castle of gold that could be seen at the warded gates that walled our claimed lands...my home...was gone.

It would take time to determine the truth, but in this state of mind, I believed I was the only survivor of the throne. The heavy crown upon my head was the only memory of my royal heritage.

*Was surviving even worth it now? Or should I have let my enemy finish me off with a bullet to my head?*

Time passed by as I continued to stand there, absorbing my reality as a rejected heir that had just lost her throne. The idea of how a single instant could completely destroy years of preparation, dreams, and wonder of the vast future only contributed to the rise in anger fighting the restrained walls to consume me.

My wolf quietly remained in my mind, but there was only so much she could handle as she quietly howled in my head - a sound of mourning.

Slowly, I took the crown off my head and lowered it so I could witness the fine details of the symbolic piece. The crown that brought so much pride and joy only encouraged the waves of sadness to rise and the anger that boiled in the pit of my heart to spiral upward.

I was fighting the mental battle transpiring in my mind as I ran through all my flaws and cowardly desperation to survive. What could I have done if I'd remained? Would I have had the ability to tame those raging flames of magic and take down all the enemies that hid in the shadows of smoke and

the darkness of the night?

*Would I have been able to kill my ex-mate?*

Without thinking, I raised the crown into the sky with every intention of slamming it onto the ground, or better yet, throwing it off this cliff so I could forget everything.

*Forget this horrendous night.*

*Forget this world that many had warned me was filled with hate and deceit.*

*Forget the royal blood that burned through my veins.*

*Forget the man who ignited all the chaos that led to my world's demise.*

My fingers clenched onto the golden metal so tightly that blood began to seep from the cuts created from gripping it so intensely. But the pain only made me laugh - the eerie sound nothing close to an expression of happiness.

*Tell me, Moon Goddess, is this worth fighting for?*

The sudden sparkle in the horizon drew my attention back to the sunrise. The rays of warmth were now all directed upon me, as if a single spotlight had been narrowed specifically to bless me with its shining light.

If that was the sign our Goddess wished to deliver to me, it was enough to force me to take a deep inhale before I let it out.

Bowing my head as if I were being crowned, just like I had hours before, I summoned the strength and courage to lift my arms and place the crown back upon my head. I could imagine the pride and joy that flooded my mother's face as she placed the crown on me in front of our congregation.

I remembered the howls of approval as all those who had watched me reach that final moment praised my persistence. Swallowing the lump in my throat, I forced myself to lift up my head as I watched the sunrise with my head held high.

My kingdom had fallen...but it wouldn't be forgotten. The bloodshed of my innocent people wouldn't be left to soak into the universe's soil in vain.

Today, our enemy had won and I was spurned and forgotten, but that wouldn't be the case forever. A crown sat heavily upon my fated head, and it gave me power, control, and the opportunity to face my enemies again.

*Only this time, no longer would I be a weak queen.*

A time would come when I'd rise from the ashes and sit upon a new throne, one that my enemy was surely desperate to claim, and then, he'd see me. They would all see me.

The crunch of a branch had my blade back in my grasp and my body swiftly spun to greet the individual behind me - the sharp blade to their throat. My eyes widened at the familiar face, and the recognition of who they were in my eyes made them smile in pure sadness.

"You've survived, Alexandra."

"Edwin..." I whispered the name of our family's first-in-command. "You...survived?"

"Barely," he admitted, and I noticed that one of his arms was severely burned. As painful as the second and potential third-degree wounds appeared, he took a step back and went down on one knee. "I will follow your command, Your Majesty."

His dedication meant more than I was sure he realized, and it triggered my tears once more as I fought the sobs that threatened to escape if I allowed them. With a few deep breaths, I turned away to look at the horizon once more.

"We take this moment to acknowledge the fallen." My voice trembled, but my words were clear. "Then...we begin our plans for revenge."

"Yes, Queen Alexandra."

"Alexis," I corrected and fought hard to smile. "From this day forward, my royal heritage will be a secret between us until it's time to enact our revenge."

"Yes, Alexis."

I felt his presence as he stood at my side, and with the tender touch of his

hand upon my shoulder, we watched the sun continue to rise high in the sky as we mourned the loss of our family, friends, and loved ones.

Today, I vowed to change my shattered destiny.

***I won't be a Rejected Queen forever...***

## THE EVOLUTIONARY WORLD OF CLOCKWORK MAGIC

~ FIVE YEARS LATER~

"SEIZE her before the strike of the clock!"

***"This is how you enjoy spending your time?"***

My lips quirked upward as I pushed off the ground to head into the web of branches. Their dead black surface and bareness only aided in my task of diverting these crooks' attention from what Edwin was scheming on the other side.

"Spending our time," I breathed out loud as I continued to push myself higher and higher with each branch. "Besides, we have to wait for the clockwork wave. Only a minute or two to go."

I reached the very top branch of the tree I'd been climbing, which gave me a moment to crouch down and look at my wolf tattoo on my upper right thigh. The growling wolf head was almost filled with the shimmery pink ink when my attention was drawn to its magical essence.

It was the only way I could track when I'd landed myself in a clockwork situation – since the pink ink was absent in the world above. *The real world versus this ancient civilization I once called home.*

"About a minute," I whispered.

***"To the left."***

Her warning was simply a bonus because my body was already moving - avoiding the strike of a blade that surely would have done some damage to my gorgeous neon pink locks.

I loved how I effortlessly turned through the air to see my cloaked opponent, my arm rising up while my hand created the perfect representation of a gun with my fingers.

"Boom."

The word triggered a single flame at the tip of my finger while my eyes connected with my approaching threat, their eyes of murderous intent widening the moment they noticed the flame.

Not a second later, the flickering flame burst in an explosive force that sent me further back while the man screamed. His body was engulfed in flames, the consequence for thinking he could lay a mark upon my royal flesh.

I flipped my body at the right moment, my feet landing on a thick branch. It gave me the platform to push upward once more and avoid the flaming body coming downward.

"JACOB!" another individual screamed, but the sound was but an echo as I raced forward.

***"Was that necessary?"***

"Not really, but I love a bit of combustion in our evening playtimes. Don't you?"

***"Your desire for bloodshed is an addiction you need to work on."***

"C'mon! It's not that bad," I argued with a huff before my eyes widened and a curse left my lips. "Shit!"

The tsk that echoed within my mind was followed with the trigger of a shift. My bones cracked out of place and the world of eerie darkness blew up in various hues.

I was suddenly in a dark teal atmosphere with orange glowing hues that



acknowledged whatever living creatures survived this plague of a world. The only pink being was me - my transformation now complete as my body burned with pink and black flames.

When I crashed into the wall of darkness set out to obliterate me, my body simply hummed at the dark void of energy that sucked at my flesh.

Landing upon the desolate ground, my wolf, Maeve, took the lead. She pushed us forward a few feet before spinning around to face our approaching enemy. I could only imagine their gleeful expressions, thinking they had caught such rare prey.

They knew nothing about my sweet, devilish wolf, Maeve. I called her Eve for short, and the nickname reminded me of what an intoxicating badass she was. The men chasing us should have backed down while I was in the driver's seat.

*Now they were all fucked because Eve never left survivors.*

She'd be a merciless queen in the ranks of royalty, and I guess that was why Moon Goddess decided it was best for her to be the "wolf" in this equation while I was the human with enough sanity to not turn this world upside down.

*As if this world hadn't been fucked up ever since that fateful day.*

I wondered if the Senator of Darkness regretted his actions that night. I doubted it, but it was only a matter of time before the sightings of pink and orange flames reached his ears.

He'd desperately crave to obliterate the rumors of the queen's uprising.

*That's when I'd lay my mark.*

This was just one of those needed confrontations, and the bonus was getting Eve to let out some of her burning fuel so I wouldn't be a bitch 24/7, as Edwin enjoyed calling it.

Eve whimpered, the sound pure mockery, and if I could, my head would be shaking from side to side.

*Really? You question me setting some random dude on fire, but you're*

*whimpering to bring your prey into your dark nest.*

**"Priorities,"** she replied. **"The wave is approaching."**

*Ah. So we gotta kill faster. Got it.*

The racing footsteps were heading our way, cueing Eve to extinguish her pink flames as we sat down to blend with the darkness. This wouldn't take long, but a little fun before the wave threw us back up to the surface was always guaranteed when I had to waste energy shifting.

*Plus, Maeve was hungry.*

"Where is she?" the first male hissed.

"I heard her whimpering!" the second man declared.

"Fuck. She killed Jacob," a third man emphasized, his voice thick with sadness.

"He was cocky!" a fourth man acknowledged. "If he'd remained in formation, he would have survived."

"We've got to hurry. The wave is coming," the second man urged.

"We can't fuck this up. She could be an Inferno wolf. We catch her, we'll be fucking rich and praised," the first man stated in delight.

"It won't be that easy to capture her," the third man reasoned.

"She's weak. All their kind knows how to do is throw fire at people. Besides, she's a female. They're weak bitches that deserve to remain in the kitchen until it's our time to fuck them."

The others chuckled as they got even closer. "We should indulge the moment we have her in our grasp," the second man encouraged.

"Fuck, I haven't enjoyed some good pussy in ages," the fourth one said and sighed.

"Think of that shit when we've got our prey in our grasp. The moment you grab her, trigger the stone. We'll be able to teleport to the location that will buy us some time above. Secluded warehouse. Perfect to do whatever while we wait for the Senator."

"Guys?" the third man hesitantly questioned.

"What?" The others came to a stop - *a clear mistake*.

"I can't move."

"You just had to get yourself into a damn web-" the fourth guy began but suddenly cursed. "What the fuck? I can't move."

"Shit. Neither can I," the second guy grunted.

"Dammit. What the fuck is this black stuff?" the first guy questioned in disgust.

"Fuck. We're going to miss the opportunity! The wave is seconds away- GAH!"

My patience - *or should I say Eve's* - ran out the moment the third guy had revealed his circumstance. Our sharp teeth tore through the fourth guy's throat, ripping his head off and tossing it with just enough force to make it drop to the floor where the others stood.

The silence that followed only emphasized their horror as the fourth guy's body dropped to the ground and began to bleed out. He got the "cruel" ending since he seemed to be the ultimate jerk in the group.

With the wave approaching, he'd return to the surface headless and deal with the pain all over again. No wonder beheading was a normal way of death back in the day. Research did say that the chopped head would feel everything its body felt for three long minutes.

*For shifters, it was way longer, which was why ripping the head off was the best way to kill a wolf.*

"Fuck! Where's the wave? Get us out of here!"

"Can't we use the stone?"

"Fuck! Four has it! Dammit!"

They were quivering in their traps while looking around to pinpoint which direction I was hiding in, but they couldn't hear my prowling footsteps that were softly cushioned by the dark ink of magic they had tried to use against me.

It was always amusing when people tried to use darkness against me. As

if Inferno wolves were a part of some "holy light" squad. None of them knew the true origin of my extinct race, or how deeply connected we were to the very element that most individuals labeled as evil.

*The common misconception of elements and their resonance with good and evil.*

Everyone assumed the Senator wanted me because of the flaming light and pink flames that were prophesied to be his downfall, but the very root of my creation was based on darkness. The only reason why I hadn't submitted to its grand power was thanks to my family, who'd sheltered me.

*Until the crown was laid upon my head. Then...everything went to hell.*

"Fuck. This cunt played us!" I zoned back in to the cries of these men. Poor Eve was tired of waltzing around them in the dark shadows. We came to a stop behind guy one as two and three looked to him for direction.

"We'll be free when the wave hits us, but fuck! We were so damn close. How did she use this against us? The web was designed to capture those of darkness! The scheming bastard of a salesman."

*Capture those of darkness...hmm. Not bad, I guess.*

**"I'm bored,"** Eve announced.

*I thought you were hungry?*

**"Lazy. Their energy isn't dark enough for my taste."**

*Hm. They're definitely weak. Wanna switch? I can gather all the darkness at once.*

**"Sure. At least I got to stretch."**

"Captain!" one of the guys squeaked, and the first guy froze as Eve purposely exhaled strong enough for the air from her snout to brush against the man's backside.

The poor guy froze like a damn statue, while the other two were trembling so hard surely they would pee their pants any second now.

Eve pulled back, triggering the sound of my bones cracking back into place, before I placed my hands at the sides of this man's head and allowed

my flames to ignite in the palms of my hands. The man screamed at the sudden spark of light, but it was the heat that followed that left him crying out for mercy like he was on fire.

*Didn't need to light him up to enjoy the wrath of my flames.*

"Guess you three won't be enjoying my luscious body, particularly my tight pussy," I whispered with a voice far different than my own. "Send Lucifer my regards."

The spike of fear that rushed in the second and third guy's eyes only widened further as they watched his voice go out while his body began to melt from the excruciating heat I expelled from the pink flames in my grasp.

In mere seconds, he was a puddle of bubbling flesh, but I was already shooting my flames outward. The pink flickers of energy shifted to black and wrapped around the remaining two men like flaming whips.

They didn't stand a chance as I triggered the absorption process, watching the life literally ooze away from their eyes along with the rest of their energetic force, which was being sucked into the streams of black and swarming into my body.

I smiled in delight as I let my eyes roll back, my body enjoying the flow of power filling my magical veins. They may be cruel individuals who were going to face the consequences, but they had a good amount of dark energy to consume.

This was one of the reasons why the Dark Senator needed our kind. To absorb the darkness in people's bodies and transform it into a weapon of destruction.

It made sense from a person who made it his duty in life to overthrow kingdoms in shadowy darkness and steal the light in their bodies to feed whatever creature lived within himself, but destroying my kingdom made things personal.

*And all I had to do was wait for the prime opportunity to gather an army of my own to combat his attempt to rule.*

With a gurgling choking sound, the two individuals dropped to the floor, but I knew once the wave hit us, they would be nothing but ash. Only the decapitated body would remain, seeing as flaming Jack's body wouldn't remain due to my unique flames.

*They don't extinguish until the prey's very bones are burnt to crisp.*

With a sigh, I opened my eyes that were surely pitch-black, continuing to breathe heavily. The process may energize Maeve, but it exerted the human body quite a bit due to the intense magic it drew from the host.

I'd trained myself long enough to not faint from the mere exertion, but after the chase I'd done across these unknown lands, I could use a drink or two.

"Time to head to the bar," I whispered and moved my hands through my short pink locks. My slight black roots must have shown thanks to my feeding, and my white tinsel strands that ran through my pink locks were surely black with pulsating magic, but it would simply blend in with my heavy shadow makeup.

With a stretch, I pushed into the pocket of my leather shorts, pulling out my dark red lip gloss and donning it on my lips to give a new, glossy look.

I felt the wave to my left - prompting me to spin just in time to face the very wave that always reminded me of a wall of flames because of the various hues of orange and gold with pinches of red.

I closed my eyes as the heated wall crashed into me. My surroundings swirled all around while I sped the process by taking a few steps forward in my black stiletto heels.

I knew I'd been released from the smell of smoke, the loud beeps coming from the bumper-to-bumper traffic, and the various lights of buildings coming from the end of the alleyway I'd landed myself in.

Taking a moment to breathe the disgusting air, I let out the deep exhale and shook my head.

"I swear, polluted air is total shit in comparison to the other side."

**"And you expected to smell cotton candy and chocolate?"** Eve inquired.

*Last time we did. That was fucking heaven. I was damn confused how we got into that random fair, but now I miss it. Could have gotten Edwin to buy me some chocolate.*

**"We better get paid overtime for this,"** Eve huffed. **"Those men were a waste."**

*I agree. I thought we'd find some type of lead, but I guess not.*

**"We need to confirm if the rumors about the throne are true."**

*Yes.*

The rumors called for all the strongest men in the land to be summoned and compete in discovering the Wolf Queen, which was an old legend.

It was a tale in which a woman of flame and darkness would become an heir to the strongest king in our supernatural world. With our Moon Goddess's blessings, a queen born of royalty would emerge with the ability to control the clockwork, one whose power of flames resembled the burning essence of the wave and could summon the very flames of hell to her aid.

This individual would be the most powerful within their kingdom and would be given the opportunity to mate whomever she wished. The rewards were endless: power, fame, fortune. If one could control the wave, they'd be able to control exactly when a wave arrived or departed, or create a schedule where those from the lands of tradition could visit the land of present technology - and vice versa.

Maybe to some, it wasn't a valuable ability to harness, but to those who had powerful ranks in this world of supernatural capabilities, it could be the perfect weapon against humanity.

Which brought us to the primary question.

*Am I, Alexandra, the destined Wolf Queen?*

Thus far, I wasn't sure and neither was my very small circle of people I trusted. No one really understood the Senator's purpose for destroying the kingdom of Inferno wolves, aside from the obvious reasons, like how our



very existence was far too close to this potential prophecy. This prophecy that had big, grown-ass men starting wars and gathering their strongest men across the lands for this competition.

There were so many loopholes, like this competition for example. How would one know that this fateful competition would deliver them the Wolf Queen and the power she carried? Or why would the Wolf Queen simply mate someone because they're powerful?

From how they described this woman of burning grace, she was a firecracker of power and could call various types of fire to her grasp, control the elements of darkness and potentially light magic, AND control the clockwork waves.

*She sounded like an overpowered badass with a crown sitting upon her head.*

Anyone with that much power in their hands didn't need a man. She needed someone destined to fill whatever she possibly lacked.

Everyone had flaws - insecurities that nagged at their subconscious when they got lost in their inner thoughts and the negative wavelengths threatened to cripple them entirely.

I bet a being like this would be lucky to find one person they trusted, so they would need someone standing by their side that helped complete them. This individual didn't need power, and probably didn't need wealth in any currency.

*Maybe all she wants is a companion to talk to?*

It was hard to imagine because the Wolf Queen very well could be the Moon Goddess for all we knew, but no one wanted to even consider such possibilities. I guess everyone enjoyed thinking outside of the box rather than looking right in the middle to the very source of our creation and wondering what her true motive was for creating this idol of power.

*Is something bigger brewing behind the scenes that we know nothing about?*

The day our kingdom fell was when the first clockwork wave struck.

It was a short few minutes after Edwin had found me. The two of us had been standing on the cliff-top watching the last stream of smoke enter the brilliant sky that was flooded with sunlight.

For a brief moment, the sun was at the perfect height and its rays delivered that sense of warmth. Then, as if an eclipse had been ignited, the world fell into a dark Void for a long minute.

*Then the wall of magic flickered into existence.*

Neither Edwin nor I had moved because we were struck with complete shock. When the wave was about to hit us, all I could do was hold Edwin's hand and pray Moon Goddess would deliver us to the rest of my family members if this was our end.

The following events were honestly blurry to me, but I did recall Edwin shaking me to stay awake. Our land of warmth and flames was a complete wasteland of decay and frost on the other side of the wave, and when I caught a sight of it, the remaining pieces of my shattered heart simply broke into tiny pieces.

The clockwork wave brought its victims to a world of Void Mastery. It was called that by official experts who'd been working on identifying how the waves worked.

I simply called it the Void, because it was a world that unlocked how the "surface" world appeared in the grand shadows. Some would say it unlocked the magical world of ancient civilization that some would assume had been lost many centuries ago, but from what I'd gathered in the last few years as a clockwork traveler, it was the unlocked oasis of the present world.

Our closed-off kingdom may have been filled with a world of life in the Void, but due to the Senator's onslaught that night, the blood of my fallen kingdom and the plagued darkness that lingered only turned the Void reality into a desolate place.

Some places were completely opposite.

For example, this alleyway I stood in was grim, filled with polluted smoke from surrounding buildings and those who loved to smoke during their work breaks and graffiti all over the walls, but on the other side of the Void was forest that carried some sort of life.

When it came to the Void, the key to survival was swift adaptation.

It was one of the reasons why wolves were some of the best at traveling through the Void. We adapted in mere seconds because our heightened senses of smell and hearing and our high stamina levels assisted us when we were thrown into crazy environments.

Because of our ability to adapt to cold climates, our speed, our agility, and how easy it was to find decent food to survive on, many wolf shifters were sought out for expeditions.

The Void was also the perfect place if you were a treasure hunter, explorer, or one with royal heritage.

Many heirlooms lost on the surface world were hidden in the Void. Royalty was important because these artifacts not only choose who was worthy of discovering them, but their power was derived from the Void itself.

The common hidden items were jewelry like rings, bracelets, and necklaces, but more valuable items were canes, swords, crowns, and, in extremely rare cases, tattoos.

*How do you find a tattoo?*

You didn't. The tattoo heirlooms were one of the rarest types of magical artifacts that were blessed by the Void. Those who carried such tattoos weren't given the option of what they would look like. The chosen individual was simply the victim and whatever was inked upon their flesh was either a gift or a curse.

*Which is exactly what happened to me...twice.*

I carried not one, but two Void tattoos. The first and what I'd deemed as the most powerful tattoo showed up with the first clockwork wave: my wolf tattoo.

The colored image was pretty massive, taking up a good chunk of my right thigh with a big wolf head. The wolf had large fangs and glowing orbs that kind of looked like flames were dancing within the creature's irises.

It was growling in warning, the lines of anger written in the detailed design, but what made it pretty unique and blended well with my new persona were the various shades of pink that colored the bad boy right in.

It pretty much matched my hair and was one of the reasons I could easily move through the Void without much difficulty.

The second tattoo was surprisingly on my right arm. Whatever significance the Void had with the right side was beyond me. Regardless, this tattoo was a running wolf along my biceps. It didn't wrap around my bicep, but rather was positioned along my arm with the long, furry tail reaching my elbow, while the head of the wolf was howling upward from behind my arm with the snout of the wolf pointing upward to my shoulder.

It didn't possess the same ability to inform me when a wave was approaching, but it was the reason why my flames were pink, I was able to cloak myself with the shadows, and Maeve was a badass psycho with various abilities a wolf shouldn't possess.

*Alright, Eve was a badass psycho because of our trauma, but I personally felt this tattoo simply furthered that progress and added a dose of “yes, here are a bunch of abilities to make you more of a badass.”*

Some of these abilities were summoning flaming wolves to my aid and, if I was angry enough, I could shift those very wolves into flaming soldiers and wreak havoc on whoever pissed me off.

*I'd done it once. It was fun as fuck but had me out of commission for a few days. Definitely a last resort move.*

Needless to say, thanks to Edwin, I'd been able to keep most of my abilities on the down-low, just like my royal heritage.

To the world, I was Alexis Wolf, the rich, rebellious daughter of some family down south who was living in the busy streets of New York after

moving from L.A. Due to my inability to follow Edwin's orders to be your average insignificant royal cousin, I decided to set off and become a clockwork wave traveler but was forced against my will to bring Edwin along for the ride to be my watchful "guardian".

As farfetched as the story was, everyone believed it because it was exactly that: *farfetched as fuck*. No one would question my "dreams" of learning about the waves and one day obtaining some sort of name for myself that would garner fortune and status.

There were plenty of potential clockwork travelers, but there were only a few that carried the reputation to lead some of the richest and most high-class royals of our country, let alone those of other nations.

*And one of those very legendary men was a good acquaintance of mine.*

After a quick check of my outfit, I fixed my leather harness bralette and black leather shorts before repositioning my over-the-knee fishnet socks.

With a slight bob of my head in approval, I waltzed out of the alleyway and blended in with the busy streets of pedestrians. Another perk of my ability was marking certain places as my check-in points - the alley being one of them.

It was easy, normally empty, and even if you did waltz into someone enjoying their smoke breaks, they never batted an eye your way because they didn't want any trouble.

Within ten minutes, I was exactly where I wanted to be. I turned the corner and noticed a familiar individual leaning against the wall with a bouquet of flowers.

**"Great. We have to appease our slave,"** Eve groaned. I swear she was a savage with high expectations of the opposite sex. Maybe it was due to the mafia dominatrix dramas I kept watching when waiting for the next wave to come by.

*C'mon. He's the reason we get to tag along on the cool expeditions. Plus, he's nice.*

***"Nice as in 'he has a crush on your beautiful ass that you continue to refuse to acknowledge due to your trust issues and his wolf likes to hump you in your sleep'."***

*Crush on "us", not me, and the humping is kind of cute. Like when someone has sex dreams.*

***"You and I both know if I was given the immense delight of taking full control for five seconds, I'd send him as far away from us as possible, right?"***

*You make it seem like he's a horrible person.*

***"He's weak, barely classifies as someone who could possibly handle YOU, not us, and it's only because of his tracking and guidance abilities that he's even at his rank of professional qualification! Plus, he thinks you're some royal cousin. And let's not discuss how it took him ten minutes to find your clit!"***

*I had to pause in my movement at her statement as my brain took its sweet time registering her comment.*

*Was it really ten minutes? Felt like fifteen.*

***"Doesn't that turn you OFF in any way?!"***

*Well....kinda, but we have sexual needs and it's not my fault your existence makes me horny as fuck. If you weren't such a sex addict, I would probably last without having sex every month like normal shifters and not every week. Don't even try to bring up Heat Season because I already know Grayson isn't going to last, so I got us a vibrator.*

***"A plastic stick is not going to appease us."***

*It vibrates...*

***"Goddess of the Moon, please brings us a sex partner who can pin us to a wall and ram into us like a damn hyperactive sex thrust machine."***

*See? Moon Goddess ain't gonna listen to shit because you're ungrateful for what we currently have!*

***"Moon Goddess knows our fine ass can get someone better, and don't***

***try to act like no one agrees. Edwin thinks he's a weak imbecile and only lets you still mingle with Gray whatever because he's friends with Rafael.***

*I hope Raf is in so I can have that Fruity Pebble vodka shit he made us last time. That hit the fucking spot.*

***"You aren't even listening to me!"***

*What?*

*"Alexandra."*

I blinked at the real use of my name, my eyes now locking onto a pair of hazelnut ones as I took in the 5'7" male in front of me. His ash silver hair was slightly frizzled like he'd wrapped up some sort of magical session that made his hair lift up, and he wore a simple black t-shirt and blue jeans.

If it wasn't for the slight cologne lingering on his clothes, I would have assumed he didn't have work today, but he only put anything scented on when he had to go to work or returned from a strenuous expedition.

One of the few reasons he knew my real name was because it sounded fucking amazing in bed compared to Alexis. Adding the fact that I was one of a good hundred if not thousands of Alexandras in NYC alone, it wasn't harmful.

*If he were a mere stranger though, that would be a hell no.*

*"Is Eve pestering you?" he inquired as he blinked innocently.*

***"Let me kill hi-!"***

I shut her up briefly by taking a step forward and going right in to kiss Grayson on the lips in greeting. He blinked while I smirked against his lips and watched his face grow red within seconds.

"Hey, Grayson," I sweetly greeted and looked to the bouquet of flowers in his grasp. "Pink and orange roses. How sweet! Is that for me?"

He grew even more flustered as he slowly nodded while lifting his free hand to ruffle through his hair. "I saw them walking over here and figured they would look nice on your nightstand so..."

"Ah," I hummed and leaned in close. "Does that mean you're coming over

tonight?"

He didn't need to look up or down because we were the exact same height thanks to my heels. I could run for my life in these bad boys, which thankfully added a good four inches to my 5'3" height. Those years of training and walking around the castle in heels had proven themselves worthwhile now that heels and stiletto boots were my usual go-tos when it came to footwear.

The reasoning was simply because men respected taller women. There was something "cute" about being 5'3" that made men think of you as a little kid instead of a grown-ass woman that could kick their asses without even trying.

*Plus, when you fought in them, you normally grabbed people's attention.*

"D-Do you want me to come over?" he inquired.

"I mean, we could go to my place," I reasoned. "Though Edwin's gonna be around so good luck with that."

"He's always around," Grayson muttered and boldly - *but quietly* - added, "I...well...I had some spare time to clean the place, so do you want to come over?"

I had to blink a few times while I stared at him like he'd completely lost it.

"What?" Sorry, but my brain needed a redo because it wasn't processing the first statement.

Grayson further blushed before he once again ran his hands through his ash silver locks.

"Do you want to come over?" he asked clearer now while he shyly met my shocked gaze. "I just finished an expedition and it'll be a while till the next wave, so I was hoping you'd pass by once you're done with whatever plans you have for tonight."

***"Impressive. For once the shy imbecile has some balls,"*** Eve huffed but I could feel her sarcasm and pure annoyance.



"I'd love to come over," I practically purred while I moved right in to press my hands lightly on his chest. "What are we going to do? Eat cookies and watch old re-runs of Law and Order?"

"No," he groaned.

"No cookies? Or chocolate? Or food in general?" I gasped in horror.

Poor guy was dealing with a hint of Eve's impatience, which was clearly filtering through me. She liked when people were just direct with us, similar to Edwin, who went straight to the point.

He was a big influence on my lack of patience because he didn't carry any either. It was an "either tell me what you want or don't bother my soul" motto.

If his face got any redder, the poor man would just pass right out. I didn't know why he was still so shy, especially when we were both twenty-five and had enjoyed sex plenty of times. Was he good at it? He was getting there, but he was my first and I guess I' rather stick to one cock than hop on different ones each day of the week.

*Though it would probably help me find a committed relationship rather than whatever this was with Grayson.*

We weren't official, which was partly my fault - *or essentially all my fault because I was acting like a blind fool.* I think he sensed I wasn't ready to take things to the next step. My whole mission to become one of the best clockwork wave travelers was clearly getting in the way as the perfect excuse for Grayson to hold back on asking me out.

With my goal to be a traveler and his role normally requiring him to use the waves to travel to different places in the supernatural world, I guess neither of us could commit unless we went everywhere together.

I wasn't ready to travel the supernatural world with Grayson because he was what some would call a "good boy" and I was just a magnet for trouble. I could simply be standing, breathing, minding my own damn business, and the world would light up in flames while every pointed finger would head in my

direction.

Would I be surprised? No, but it would be a pain in the ass to carry such a burden on my shoulders. I didn't need to bring whatever lingering problems I had with my existence to his plate full of various tasks.

It was just another reason on the list of excuses that piled up until it was strikingly clear that we wouldn't get far in the realms of relationships. For now, friends with benefits ensured we catered to each other's needs but weren't serious enough to commit to anything more.

*With Maeve and Edwin's disapproval, it would be a pain in my ass anyway.*

"If you're hungry...I'll treat you to food before we go to my place."

"Then what are we doing?" I inquired with a sly smile. He didn't realize what my intentions were until his back pressed against the cement wall. My front side pressed against his while my lips teased the soft surface of his tender ones.

"Alexis," he breathed because his heartrate was beating like a drumline and his breathing went from spiked to a rollercoaster on the verge of heavy panting.

It only made me further grin as I tugged on his bottom lip before capturing his lips in my possessive grasp. This was probably the reason why no other guy would last with me. I didn't wait to be seduced by any man.

If they didn't give in to me, I'd work my magic to get exactly what I wanted. He had no choice but to play to my tune, his arms spread out to the sides as he continued to hold the bouquet in one hand while our lips were lost in my leading role of kissing marathons.

I couldn't help but tease his groin, grinding against it with my lower half and stimulating him to grow harder with each pressing movement. He groaned into my mouth, the rumbling sound making me smile and break the kiss just to see the lust in his eyes.

That was the one thing he couldn't hide from me. His immense desire to

fuck me would always be obvious in those brown eyes of his. Sure, Grayson wasn't the strongest individual on the block or very Alpha-like, but he never hid his true emotions from me.

I could read him like an open book, which could be a general advantage if allowed for everyone else to see. Only, Grayson only allowed me to see the true depth of emotions hidden in those chestnut orbs, and it was why I could trust him enough to continue our intriguing friends-with-benefits relationship.

"What?" I whispered finally as we caught our breath.

"We'll..." He trailed off and forced himself to breathe. "We'll continue where we're leaving off now."

That was good enough for me.

"Okay," I purred happily and wrapped my arms around his neck to give him one final, passionate kiss. "We'll continue later. I'll accept your rain check and flowers as compensation." I leaned further in to whisper, "You better let me ride you like a damn bull in the wild."

"Yes, Alexis," he agreed because he knew the moment we got into the department of sex, nothing was off-limits. He may not be into the same kinks as I was, but when it came to basic sex, he had enough stamina to handle my hypersexuality.

He calmed down enough to lightly wrap his arm around my waist, only confirming he enjoyed our closeness as he slowly met my intrigued gaze.

"You came out of the wave, didn't you?"

"Boo." I pouted my lips. "How'd you know?"

"The energy is all over you," he voiced the obvious. "Why did you enter this one? It's getting dangerous going by yourself."

"I didn't go on my own," I reasoned. "Edwin was with me. I was the distraction while he grabbed some loot we found."

"Stole," he corrected.

"Stole? How is it stealing if you can't protect it?" I inquired.

He sighed. "Edwin has to stop bringing you on such dangerous

expeditions."

"Why? Nervous I'm gonna get myself killed?" I sweetly hummed. "Aww. I love when you worry about me."

He gave me a look but tightened his hold around me, which only made me frown.

"What's wrong?" I knew when he got more physical with his affection that something had to be wrong. Grayson was shy and got flustered whenever we did anything "affectionate" in public, but when he actually allowed it to show in small gestures, it meant he was worried for my own well-being.

*Worried Grayson was never a good sign.*

"The killings are escalating," he muttered quietly as if this alley entrance were filled with people and he didn't want anyone grabbing a single word of our conversation.

"You mean the ones related to finding the Inferno wolves?"

He slowly nodded while he bit his bottom lip in frustration.

"Grayson, talk to me," I urged quietly, stripping any humor from my voice. This had to be serious.

"The last wave I was able to be in touch with one of the strongest kingdoms that has a chance to take down the Senator. The Frost Kingdom of Vannah. On the surface, they're probably some of the richest investors in various business aspects. The king lives in Dubai currently, but his son is the current Alpha of the Frost Kingdom. Mostly the Beta deals with everyone and no one really sees the Alpha, but they have loads of territory in the Void realms, enough to be an equal if not stronger than the Senator's stronghold."

"How long have they been striving to reach such a level?"

"Five years?" he confessed. "Maybe less. They say the Frost Kingdom actually used to be allied with the Dark Senator, but something happened. I'm not sure if it was because of the slaying of the hidden Inferno Kingdom or whatnot, but it destroyed their relationship. Obviously, the clockwork waves were ignited around the same time, so maybe they think of it as competition.

Who knows, but..." He trailed off.

*Is he worried about me or something? Why is he struggling?*

He didn't know that I was an Inferno wolf. My persona as Alexis was that I was a hybrid witch who could use various elemental magic. I was only really good at dark magic and fire, but I could do a bit of wind magic here and there, and, if I concentrated hard enough, healing magic, but that was pushing it.

My magic was based on destructive power - the chaos my empowerment brought to my elements and the emotional turmoil I carried within my heart to aid in its flawless delivery.

Regardless, I knew why Grayson was worried.

"Are you worried they're going to try to hunt me down because I use fire magic?"

He looked into my eyes once more, and surely he was admiring my orange eyes that probably twinkled with the flickering overhead light.

"The last wave resulted in thirty-five women being murdered."

"Thirty...five?" I questioned. "What the fuck?"

"That was only here in NYC. They haven't figured out the total number yet."

"Don't tell me it was because they used fire magic?"

"Fire magic, too pretty, and a few because they had pink hair."

"Now that's just rude," I huffed. "I fit all three categories. I'm fucked!"

He rolled his eyes at my confidence, but I was surprised when he closed the distance and very gently kissed me.

"Grayson..." Okay. I was fucking worried now.

"It's like a fucking scavenger hunt and we can't figure out why. It hasn't inched into the surface world, but the rumors are flooding the dark streets. I'm not sure if the Senator got another fortune teller to predict shit, but it's advised that women avoid entering the wave until the police can get involved."

"What are the police gonna do? Sit on their asses doing desk duty and write a report about odd killings in the wave targeting females? Look at all the bloodshed that happens with crooks trying to rape, steal, and beat the shit out of anyone they find in the wave. You think they do that because they're frightened of the PoPo coming after them? The police simply come to pick up the bodies and write reports."

"They're thinking of hiring the Cartiers of Vannah."

I frowned. "Who is thinking of hiring the 'mafia' of Vannah?"

"They're not the mafia," Grayson argued.

"Cartier is the fancy word rich people use unless you're talking about the fancy jewelry store, but to me, that sounds like the damn mafia."

"It's a special pack within the Frost Kingdom. They don't normally interfere with anything outside of their kingdom's circumstances, but apparently, this is personal."

"Why?"

"Whoever is prompting this sudden onslaught of females made the Princess of Frost a target."

"Oh shit," I cursed. "The Alpha has a sister?"

"Mhmm. Older, too. She would be the heir to the throne, but the Frost Kingdom doesn't believe in females ruling."

*Okay. I laughed like a damn lunatic.*

"You're not fucking serious. We're in the year what? 2055 with our wave timeline of whatever ancient civilizations period it's wrapped around and we're worried about a woman ruling a kingdom? Can they go check England and their royal family? Queen Elizabeth II is still chilling thanks to her fae abilities and she's a cool queen."

He actually smirked at my defense, but it wasn't long before it fell and his eyes seemed far away. "They almost killed her. They don't think she'll make a full recovery. She'll have some sort of disability."

"It was that bad?" That really did sound serious. "They're seriously going

with the impression that any female with fire abilities is an Inferno wolf?"

"That's what we gathered." He sighed. "I'm not sure. I'm gonna find out when I go make a report at base. The next wave won't be for a while so maybe we'll be able to figure something out."

"Then you better go. Sounds like it will be a long talk," I admitted. He moved his arm but his hand lightly grazed my cheek.

"Are you okay though?"

"Of course," I stated with pride. "A few hunters aren't gonna stop me."

"You were hunted?" He arched an eyebrow my way and I nervously laughed, took the bouquet of flowers from his grasp, kissed his cheek, and was already on the bottom step of the back entrance to the bar.

"Oh look. Edwin is calling me."

"He is not!" Grayson huffed as he tried to follow me, but the door opened and sure enough, there was my 6'2" first-in-command protector, Edwin.

His black-to-striking-red hair was styled to one side, the short strands laying perfectly in place. He wore a black suit with a black undershirt and a brilliantly red tie. His eyes of red locked onto mine before they moved to glare at Grayson.

"See?" I tossed back as I spun around to give Grayson a wink - *which would hopefully tell him to skip right along before Edwin gave him some sort of lecture.* "Told you Edwin was calling. I'll see you later tonight, Grayson, and don't worry. I'm safe."

He didn't seem pleased as he stared back at Edwin with clear disappointment, but his eyes returned to mine and he nodded.

"Alright. I'll text you when I'm done. If you're still here, I'll come to pick you up."

**"He's really being a protective weakling,"** Eve huffed.

I ignored her while replying, "Okay. See you."

"Bye, Alexis," he replied and gave me a wave. He turned around and I watched him walk out of the side alley of the bar and enter the busy night

streets.

I was glad we were able to talk, but the news was heavy in nature.

*Why are females being hunted? Are they looking for me?*

Staring at the bouquet in my grasp, my eyes narrowed as my hand gripped the stems tightly.

*Only time will tell. But I won't run from their strike. I'm not a coward anymore.*



## PROTECTIVE GUARD AND BAR FIASCO

"**H**e's nice, Edwin. You can't give him dagger eyes every time you see him."

The man in question's red eyes locked onto mine, and their surfaces portrayed his disapproval.

"He's weak, skinny, and can be snapped like a twig in battle," Edwin announced and gestured for me to walk to the bar counter.

"He gave me flowers!" I pointed out and lifted the bouquet for him to see. All he did was raise his eyebrow in question before the very bundle of floral beauty lit up in red flames.

All I could do was stare at it as the red and black ashes rained down to the floor while my raised hand remained in place.

***"Thank goodness. They were ugly anyway,"*** Eve concluded.

There was a chuckle from far behind me, and I slowly turned my head to see Raf cleaning a glass with a white cloth.

"Seriously, Edwin. Your standards are going to chase away every guy who wants a chance with Alexis," he revealed. "Poor guy came here first from the wave rather than checking in with his superior."

"I don't care," Edwin concluded. "He's useless."

"He's a Wave Expeditioner who aids some of the strongest, wealthiest royally-entitled shifters we've ever heard of. He helps track supernatural

gateways and he's slowly working on the magic department. Besides, he's good at healing!"

"If you have to physically touch someone to heal them, you're useless," Edwin argued

"Ugh," I groaned. "He's working on it. You know he's even lucky he can do any magic aside from his tracking abilities and such."

"All I'm hearing is excuses," he concluded.

Raf was laughing once more before he tapped on the counter. "C'mon over, Alexandra," he urged. "I'll make your favorite Fruity Pebbles vodka drink."

I was sitting down on the black stool in one second flat, leaving Edwin to actually stare at me with disbelief while Raf was losing it once again.

"Holy shit, Alexis. You have vampire qualities hidden in them royal veins or what?"

"Nah," I proudly dismissed. "Anyone would be possessed to move as quickly as possible after trying that mesmerizing concoction of a drink!"

"Coming right up then," Raf assured me as he got right to work.

Rafael was the only person who Edwin and I trusted with our lives. He was the third survivor of our fallen kingdom, having served my family long before I was even born.

He'd actually been the one to get Edwin out of the burning blaze before Edwin went on a search to find me. However, for a brief moment in time, we were separated from Raf due to the first wave.

Rafael was an extremely rare hybrid mix of dragon and wolf shifter - *how that worked was beyond me* - so he was not only gifted with the ability to shift between wolf and dragon, but he also was similar to Grayson in that he could navigate the clockwork world and the waves that would either bring us back here or to other worlds.

He didn't need my type of stone, magic artifacts, or weapons to help him maneuver himself and those around him to safety if push came to shove in

the realms of the clockwork, but similar to Edwin, he enjoyed keeping his abilities on the down-low.

Instead of working a job like Grayson's, he ran this bar where he got all the information he needed. It was specifically for supernaturals, but it didn't mean humans couldn't enjoy coming by. They had their own "three-hour" section in the evening and only those who agreed to not harm them in any way were allowed to join.

*By magic oath since supernaturals didn't follow promises and all that jazz.*

For the last five years, that's exactly what he'd done - work in the bar during the nights, sleep during the days, and train me from three to five unless a wave came by and fucked the schedule up.

Many times prior to when I was confident enough to move through the waves on my own, he followed me and made sure I was safe, like Edwin did.

It wasn't like anyone could enter the clockwork waves, so it wasn't like the whole world was sucked up into this universe, but even with the ten percent that was worthy enough to be marked and privileged to enter this altered space, the level of "good" versus "evil" was horrendous.

*Meaning the bad, selfish jackasses that only wanted fortune, artifacts, and grand connections overpowered the neutral and good guys.*

Compared to Edwin's ash-white complexion that made him look like a damn vampire the majority of the time because of his very selective wardrobe, Raf was a perfect cocoa shade. His hair was silky black and extremely long, to the point he normally braided it or put it in a ponytail and then wrapped it around into a massive bun during bar hours to make sure his delicate hair survived the humid environment of the party nights.

He was double Edwin's physique with broad shoulders, muscles all over, and he normally got mistaken for the bouncer of the place multiple times. A good half of his guests assumed he was Fae because the majority of bulkier African Americans were from the Fae lands. It was a stereotype, obviously,

but there weren't many dragon shifters in NYC period. As for wolves, there were more multicultural wolves of various races in Canada and the warmer states like California.

NYC's population still was a good sixty percent human, while the rest was divided into various supernaturals. Some were the common races like wolf shifters, vampires, Fae, and surprisingly cat shifters, but the rarer categories included Kitsunes, mermaids, hawks, bears, dragons, and the extreme side, unicorns.

*Yes. Unicorn shifters existed.*

For our time here in NYC, we'd focused on two things: existing and information gathering.

The training was always incorporated into the routine, as were days of rest.

With Edwin being a Dark Fae Inferno wolf, he worked the best at night, which coordinated nicely because all the bad shit happened after midnight. As for myself, I laid low by doing the particular hobbies I enjoyed when I was a princess being trained to rule.

*Reading, writing books and poems, messing around with magic, and dancing.*

Sex apparently wasn't a worthy enough "hobby" - *rude* - so that was what I did on the side. Even though I had the privilege to drink, I didn't come to the bar until it was closed. I didn't like the idea of people listening in on my business or trying to get every spec of my measurement to try and use against me in the gambling game of tracking in the wave.

Bars may be fun to enjoy with friends, but it was an information oasis where agreements were made, rumors were shared, and one either formed an alliance in the dark realms of our world or faced the consequences outside of someone else's time.

It was becoming more evident that something was brewing behind our noses, but I wasn't sure what it could be and if it would lead to something

life-changing for a lot of supernaturals.

"Fruity Pebbles Vodka drink," Raf announced and drew my attention to him as he lowered the marvelous drink of sparkle mayhem before me. I could drool just looking at it, leaving Eve to sigh in my mind.

***"You're pathetic."***

*Admit it. You're just as happy as I am.*

"Don't get drunk," Edwin scolded as if I'd done the very deed.

"I didn't get drunk last time," I voiced.

From Raf's smirk and Edwin's judgmental glare, that was clearly a lie.

"I won't," I continued. "I have cock waiting for me tonight."

"Dump him," Edwin grumbled.

"No," I whined. "We're not even dating. And besides, he lets me ride him like a pony!"

The way Edwin cringed at my statement had Raf laughing and slapping his chest. "Oh fuck. I don't need to imagine that, Alexis!"

"I didn't force you to." I winked and took a long sip of the burning drink from fucking heaven. "Fuck. This shit is worth almost dying for."

"What?" they both questioned as I took an extra minute to enjoy the fruity flavor with that burning sensation that surely would destroy my throat if I were a mere human.

"Don't tell me you were in the wave," Raf stated like it was fact. I pointed at Edwin and blinked innocently.

"He came with me and stole!"

"What are you? Five?" Edwin spat out while narrowing his eyes at me.

"You didn't ask me to not kiss and tell, so...oops. Raf gets to know your evil deeds."

Raf rolled his eyes. "I'm not a saint," he voiced, but his eyes landed on my tall first-in-command. "Now what did you steal?"

"You're going to confiscate it if I tell you," Edwin bitterly muttered.

"If it's a cane, duh," Raf stated, amused, while he worked on making a

different drink.

"What's with your obsession with canes?" I inquired. "You don't use them."

"That's because they don't look good with a muscled guy like myself," Raf earnestly answered.

"Is that why you let Edwin use them? So you can admire them when paired with his sexy, tall, muscular frame and good looks?"

They both looked at me while Raf paused in shaking whatever concoction he'd created.

"What?" I questioned. "It's either that or your dragon tendencies are showing, because that's what they do when they lov-"

"Yes, I stole a cane," Edwin interrupted me and even ruffled my hair as he moved to sit on the stool next to me. "A few special coins in wave currency and two canes. One of them is rather feminine in nature. Could give it to a certain someone."

I completely forgot what I was saying as I gave him a puppy eye stare.

Raf shook his head. "Those puppy eyes don't work on him, Sweet Darkling,"

"I don't know why you call me that when I'm not even close to a Darkling Fae. If I were anything close, Edwin would love me instead of torturing my soul with empty taunts."

"I show my love by letting you continue your fling with that boy and trusting you enough to not die when you're being chased down by hunters."

"You were chased again?" Raf frowned as he placed a glass in front of Edwin and poured the drink he'd been making. The liquid had black sparkles with hints of red and purple magic spinning through it.

"Thanks," Edwin expressed his gratitude and didn't hesitate to gulp the strong drink down. I could only hope it was whiskey - *or something that wasn't 100% alcoholic, cause that shit hit fast.*

"Inevitably." I shrugged it off like it was no big deal. "A little extra

darkness helps me sleep well at night."

"Make sure you expel it when it gets to be too much," Raf reminded.

"Mhm. No losing my sanity," I hummed in delight as I enjoyed another long sip of my drink. "Fuck. I need this every day."

***"You'd be a horny mess if you had that all the time."***

*Would not!*

"We're gonna have to be careful during the next wave," Raf announced as he pulled a stool to his side and casually sat down. From the look in his mismatched eyes of gold and orange, he was bringing up something serious.

I paused in finishing my drink, laying it back down on the counter and pushing it far enough away that he knew I was focused.

Edwin, on the other hand, continued to drink his, but both his eyes were closed, which meant he was all ears.

"What's the hottest gossip of the night?" I inquired.

"Someone wants every pink-haired girl dead," he announced.

"Common," I acknowledged. "Like how two weeks ago they were after brunettes and a month ago were after blondes, thinking they were associated with Inferno wolves because the tint of their hair was easy camouflage."

"True, but we all knew that was to weed out the desperate individuals who want wave currency," Raf acknowledged. It was true, since wave currency wasn't like dollar bills or coins we had here.

It was like gold coins similar to those used many centuries ago in ancient civilizations, only they were more advanced with a mixed complexion of gold and orange and held value far greater than bitcoin, crypto, or NFT.

One coin was surely worth millions if not billions because they were extremely hard to find. They were rewarded to you like in video games after adventuring in forbidden spaces, entering new supernatural worlds, or defeating creatures created by the clockwork.

There were a lot of odd creatures in the wave realms, but not all of them were born from the wave. Some were created from black magic, molded by

supernaturals who wished to eliminate as many people as they could to gain their blood or dark essence. And plenty of monsters had been left behind by the Senator himself.

It was a mess and even after immense research, we hadn't ventured into sixty percent of the wave realms. You needed an army, or at least a big pack, to survive whatever occurred. Due to the limited number of individuals who could even travel into the waves, alliances were hard to come by.

"One of the most respected Seers got a vision from Moon Goddess."

"Oh." I couldn't help but frown because anything dealing with the Moon Goddess herself meant it was about to affect a shit ton of wolf shifters - *including us*. "That can't be good."

"A plague of fire will bestow itself upon the lands without warning," Raf began as his eyes began to shimmer with apricot, which told me his dragon was inching into control.

When dragons took over in storytelling, it could potentially leak more information from the universe's wavelengths.

"Walls of fire will begin to wreck the land, the anger of the fallen wolves of flame seeking revenge for the loss of their peaceful existence." Maeve and I listened carefully as he continued. "One with pink locks that mimic the shade of cherry blossoms with hues of black and white will rise to the challenge for the sake of humanity, but darkness cannot solely destroy light, just like fire cannot solely compete against ice. Where there is a queen, there is a king destined for her. Their unity will bring salvation or destruction to the world as we know it. The Queen of Flames is ready to pick up her shattered crown, and all those who wish to destroy the last of her kind shall feel the ultimate punishment from the Moon Goddess herself. With cooperation and alliances, the clockwork waves can morph into an abundance of blessings for all, but chaos will ignite a plague far heavier than flames. It will be a wave of destruction that will have mercy on absolutely no one."

His words were heavy as we sat there in silence, my mind trying to



comprehend the words that were far wiser than I would have expected.

A prophetic revelation like that was no joke. It was far more detailed than the bullshit random dudes full of greed would make up for the sake of getting some coins or blood for forsaken rituals.

"So what exactly are we supposed to do?" I inquired. "We're obviously..." I trailed off for a moment as I sensed Eve's closeness to the edge of the surface. She only did that when she either wanted to come out and play or we had unwelcome company.

"We're closed," Raf announced, looking as calm as ever as he looked past us. I had no choice but to look over my shoulder to see the five individuals at the doorway. They wore all black. They were not as muscular as Raf but certainly weren't skinny like Edwin, and from the look in their eyes, they certainly weren't here to enjoy a two-in-the-morning drink.

The leader had green hair, and I wondered what type of shifter he was. I could smell the obvious wolf scents on his comrades, but maybe he cloaked his scent to try to deceive the world into thinking he was something else.

They looked to be Mexican, and I wondered if they were some sort of mafia pack. Wouldn't be something new in these parts, but their arrival couldn't be a random occurrence.

"We read the sign," the leader declared with a smug smile.

"And yet you're in here." Raf sighed dramatically, looking like he really didn't want to deal with nonsense tonight. "Listen. If you're looking for some entertainment, you can find it outside. I'm closed and don't have time for whatever mafia bullshit you're trying to spill on my territory."

"Observant," the guy to the left of the leader declared. "We ain't here for our usual business."

"Then?" Raf pressed.

The guy to the right looked directly at me. "We're here for the girl."

"Great." I sighed and glanced away. Reaching for my drink, I continued, "Why am I always pulled into random movie shit? If y'all are trying to kidnap

me over some type of debt nonsense, just know both my parents are dead and I already cleared whatever loans they had."

"You think you're funny?" I knew it was the leader who stated that.

I took a sip of my drink and replied, "Well, I do have a few humorous perks in my vibrant personality, but I'm apparently not supposed to talk to strangers. At least, that's what my dead parents taught me."

"You're wasting our time," a guy from what I perceived was from the back stated.

"And you're wasting ours," Raf replied. "Either state why you need my guest or get out."

"She's wanted for a hundred wave coins," the leader announced.

I almost choked on the remainder of my drink. I recovered quickly, downed the remaining beverage, and spun right around to gleefully look at the group.

"One hundred wave coins? As in the wave realm currency coins? For me?! Damn! Where do I need to go to turn myself in? I'll grab those coins myself!"

They observed me like I was crazy while Edwin continued to look completely unbothered as he tilted the glass in his grasp around as if it weren't empty. Raf was just observing because we knew if he lost his cool, the whole damn bar would be in jeopardy.

*Never piss off a dragon hybrid. They didn't possess any logic when they got mad. They just burned the world down and asked questions later.*

When the group remained silent, I frowned. "What? I can't just turn myself in?"

The guy at the back to the left muttered, "It's not exactly for you. It's the reward for bringing a pink-haired girl to the Senator."

The way I pouted was followed with me stating the obvious, "So...let me get this straight. You're telling me that a badass mafia group of grown-ass men waltzed into a bar after hours to potentially kidnap an innocent yet

beautiful woman like myself because of my pink highlights?"

"Highlights?" the guy on the leader's right repeated.

"Uh duh?" I lowered my head to show the obvious black roots in my scalp. "Black roots. Meaning my hair isn't naturally pink. I only did this color because I'm getting old and my grey strands were far too annoying to tame. Obviously, you can see the many strands, right? I know they kind of look white with how dim the lights are, but in the sun, they're actually pretty gorgeous."

"You're not serious," the leader huffed.

"I'm dead serious," I said before I laughed. "Have you not heard of the constant fabricated 'quests' to bring in women with blonde and brunette hair the last couple of weeks? Like jeez, now they're going to say pink hair and that the Senator is going to pay someone a hundred wave coins to bring a girl with pink hair to him? What is this? That classic on Netflix that deals with the Darkling and sun summoners? Should I call you guys 'The Crows'? You're missing a female though, but I'd gladly join you guys!"

"Sweet Darkling, you're embarrassing them," Raf reasoned with pure pity.

I looked over my shoulder to reply. "But c'mon. Doesn't this feel like that damn classic? It was a sensational hit thirty-five years ago. Whoever is paying for this type of advertising deserves a damn Oscar nomination because they're making some people rich if they can convince a bunch of greedy individuals that kidnapping any girl with pink hair is going to deliver them fortune beyond their imagination. Do you know what people can do with one wave coin? So imagine a hundred. That doesn't seem overexaggerated at all?"

"She...kinda has a point, Boss," one of them whispered and grunted from the elbow strike from the leader himself.

"Shut up! It's legit and we ain't missing this opportunity!"

My body was completely relaxed now thanks to the exquisite drink, and I knew I'd probably need a ten-minute power nap. It was perfect timing

because I knew Edwin would simply handle this unnecessary interruption and get rid of their bodies before I opened my eyes.

Returning my gaze back to them, I let out a yawn while I moved further back against the ledge of the counter to rest my elbows while crossing my right leg to rest over my left knee.

"Listen. I'm an old, innocent woman with black and grey hair that I dyed pink for shits and giggles. I assumed with the trend of targeted hair colors that black hair was going to be the next reason for women to be assaulted, kidnapped, raped, and all that other stuff you savage, desperate men enjoy doing," I summed up. "So I'm going to take a power nap and hopefully your group will be gone when I wake up in ten minutes, okay?"

"This bitch," one of them cursed but the leader stopped him with a mere hand gesture while I yawned again.

"You think we're a joke?" the man snarled.

"Well, did you think I was taking you seriously?" I questioned back and yawned again. I really didn't time this sweet wonderland drink well because these guys were seriously cutting into my power nap time. I should have been asleep by now with Edwin enjoying another glass of harsh whiskey and Raf humming Jazz songs while he finished cleaning the last set of glasses.

*I seriously needed this nap if I wanted to enjoy hours of sex with Grayson, so these guys really needed to keep it down or get the fuck out.*

"How about this? Let me take my power nap in peace, and after ten minutes, I'll gladly come with y'all to test this apparent quest. Cool?"

**"You're beyond amusing,"** Eve praised. **"You really think they're going to cooperate?"**

*No, but at least I tried. I mean, Moon Goddess teaches us to warn our neighbors before we go on a killing spree, right?*

***"That was not in the Moon Goddess's teachings. That was what Lucifer did when he warned a large enemy pack of his arrival and they mocked him. Then he attacked and plagued them with fire and a contract that***

***forced them and their generations to be his followers."***

*Oh right! The creation of hellhounds. I forgot.*

My eyes couldn't stay open any longer. I finally let them close and further relaxed. I seriously was tired from the wave journey, but these guys really made me wish to sleep for an extra five minutes.

"Shit...did she really fall asleep?"

Poor guys thought I was joking, but my consciousness was beginning to drift as the world around me slipped away. I knew I'd be safe with Edwin sitting to my left and Raf slightly behind me on my right.

They wouldn't let me perish at the hands of a group of wasteful beings, and maybe that was what encouraged me to just sleep and let the universe take over in their demise. I couldn't tell who would make the first strike - *Edwin or Rafael* - but I knew without a doubt in my mind that the moment I opened my eyes, these poor, lost men would have already met their supernatural creator.

*I guess I'll sleep through this bar fiasco. What's the worst that can happen?*

## HIDDEN SIDES OF A POISONED EVE

~MAEVE~

"Boss, she actually fell asleep. The audacity!"

I took advantage of this extra minute of grace, ensuring Alexandra's consciousness was deep in the realms of sleep and not in that lull state of unconsciousness. She needed to be wrapped in that dark oasis for me to accomplish what I was about to do - *a bit of a secret ability she knew nothing about.*

Personally, I didn't like keeping anything from my counterpart, but hidden sides like this weren't created to be revealed so soon. I'd yet to lay my poison on those who deserved my venomous strike, and Alexandra was the key to my vengeance.

"What the..." one of the useless individuals commented, which prompted Raf's sigh.

"See what you guys have done?"

Poor group of imbeciles was probably clueless as to what they had summoned, but was it really their fault after all? You wouldn't know what's hidden beneath the sand until you placed your hand inside it.

*Sometimes there's nothing but ants and other times there's a cobra*

*waiting in disguise.*

"What?" one of the goons questioned.

"Shut up," the leader tossed to his own packmates. "Listen. We're done wasting time. Hand the girl over or we'll force you to!"

"So we're still not down with me turning myself in?" I stated with authority as I opened my eyes.

The group flinched at my mere gaze, fear leaking into the air almost immediately, which encouraged Edwin to mutter, "Raf, can you make me another drink?"

"Sure," Raf replied.

I could hopefully bribe Raf to make one more of that fruity goodness as an after-nap reward for Alexandra. I liked to spoil her after I got a bit of fresh air from my cocooned nest in the shadows of her mind. It was the least I could do as her wolf, and it would make sure my actions never surfaced in her subconsciousness on a rainy day.

"W-What the fuck?" the leader questioned in horror as his body trembled slightly. It was far better than his apparent disciples, who were surely on the verge of running back to wherever they came from.

Poor lost beings of our world. They knew nothing about darkness, let alone being evil in a world full of shadows and bloodshed.

"Stuttering already?" I calmly questioned, my voice filled with superiority. "Where's all your confidence?"

"We're not fucking afraid of you, bitch!" one of the guys in the back declared.

"Yet you're trembling as if you're in the midst of a frosty blizzard," I tossed back in amusement. "Maybe I should heat things up? It is rather chilly tonight, though it's always a tad cold at two in the morning. Works with the vibe of the night, wouldn't you agree?"

"Y-You think because you have some Alpha magic that we're frightened of you? We're not!" the leader snapped. "The Senator will enjoy fucking that

mouth of yours while we'll be rolling in fucking money for generations upon generations."

"Wouldn't it be nice to just roll in blood money you didn't earn?" I pondered to myself. "I can tell from the scents coming off your tarnished clothes that you enjoy fucking innocent human girls and dumping their bodies in the wave, right?"

They gasped as their eyes widened at my bold accusation, but their response only proved the accuracy in my words.

"Think it's not obvious?" I inquired as I uncrossed my legs, only to rest my left leg on my right knee. "Trust me. One whiff and the world knows exactly what you do on the regular to make enough of a living. And yet, you have the audacity to walk into this specific bar and demand that someone of my caliber be kidnapped by your group's dirty, tainted hands."

"You have to be her! We hit the jackpot," the guy to the right declared and pointed my way. "Shut the fuck up and come with us quietly or else-"

"What?" I questioned before he could finish his sentence. "What else can you do aside from waste my precious time? I mean, if you were so frightening, you would surely realize the obvious fact that the moment you walked into this bar and ignored the request of the owner that you were trapped in your very spot, right?"

Their eyes widened before they tried to move, only to realize rather quickly that they were glued to the spots they had been standing on this whole while.

"Shit! When the fuck?" They tried to get out of the sticky situation, which only left me giggling quietly as I worked on cracking my neck.

"It's been a while since I've come out for some fresh air. I'm rather thirsty."

That was Edwin's cue to pause in taking a sip of his new drink Raf had whipped up. With a blink, a scream of agony was followed with gurgling that silenced the rest of the pack as they watched in horror as their comrade on the



left dropped to his knees.

The scent of his blood made me excited as Edwin returned with a champagne glass full of thick red liquid.

"Fuck...what are you?! A vampire?!"

"Some like to say that," I admitted as I accepted the glass of blood and took a whiff of it. "Hmm. Not bad, but pretty disgusting quality. What did your friend do on the regular? Smoke a pack a day and enjoy injecting drugs into his veins?"

They were speechless as they watched their friend drop forward while he took his last breath.

"A shame. Would still be alive if he simply listened," I voiced and proceeded to toss the gathered blood right back on him. After passing the glass back to Edwin, I worked on admiring my hand while I thought about their previous words.

"So, show me how you'd get out of a situation like this?" I encouraged. "If you're able to escape this sticky situation, I'll gladly come with you to the Senator and see what this week's hype is all about."

The poor darlings tried to get out of their spots, grunting and huffing while using every bit of muscle to tug their feet out of my death grip. One even thought trying to take his shoes off would work but it was no use.

They were a panting mess when I was finally bored.

"Why don't we try this?" I offered. "Who told you pink hair is the next trend for kidnapping and money-making?"

The leader gritted his teeth, but the one in the far left at the back spilled the beans.

"There was a prophecy given during the last wave to the royals! It's from some strong Seer who is always correct. The fallen wolves of fire want revenge! The world is going to be overtaken by an Inferno wolf so the Senator wishes to seize any of their kind before the world is plagued with evil."

That made me laugh, the cold, amused sound surely making them tremble further as goosebumps appeared along their arms.

"Alright. So where is this Senator?" I asked. When none of them answered, I bobbed my head. "You don't know."

"We...we would seek him when we had the possession he needs."

"And you really believe once you give him this potential girl, someone like me, he'll happily let you go scot-free?"

They all frowned as I arched an eyebrow in question.

"Let's be realistic, shall we?" I suggested as I uncrossed my legs and slid off the stool to slowly walk towards them. The fear in the air was palpable, and it only made me smile in glee as I took the final step that placed me right in front of the leader.

"If I were the Senator of Darkness, who was anxious to finish what I started five years ago when I destroyed the very kingdom that's now prophesied to claim revenge, would I allow anyone else to witness my anxiety?"

I watched the man gulp as I leaned in closer and took a deep inhale. My lips further quirked as I let the air out. "To let you commoners enjoy the scent of my fear and immense delight that I'm one step closer to erasing a specific niche of wolves from our sacred history?"

Closing my eyes for a moment, I snapped my fingers and allowed the crown I'd carried upon my head since that fateful day to reveal itself for the first time in years. The men were speechless as I opened my eyes. I hoped they saw the merciless specks of orange that slowly shifted to onyx.

"Do you know what royals are taught to do when a mere stranger knows too much?" I practically whispered. Moving my hand in between them, I snapped my fingers and a single flame appeared - the warm flickering light dancing against our faces and emphasizing the villainous expression I wore with immense grace.

"To burn every strand of life within them. Light their veins up, enjoy the

hymns of their screams, and bask in the streams of sin they carry within themselves."

"No...you're-"

I placed a single finger on his rough lips and shushed him. "Tsk, tsk, now. You shouldn't kiss and tell."

If his eyes grew any wider, they surely would explode, but he flinched as his comrades began to choke, watching strings of black begin to wrap around my hand, neck, arms, and down to my waist.

He could only look with his eyes, those dilated orbs attempting to see what was happening to his friends. It was obvious from the flow of black energy that made the atmosphere thick with a sense of death that I was stealing their dark essence.

Everyone had some, whether it was a pinch or a sea of dark intentions they buried within themselves. This was what the Senator used against the world, only he didn't take from rotten criminals.

*He stole from anyone who breathed and left no survivors.*

That was exactly why he was frightened of this vision - traumatized at the reality that he'd missed absorbing the dark essence of the newly appointed Queen of the Inferno Wolves.

*Or Rejected Queen, seeing as my mate not only discarded me but also contributed to the fallen travesty.*

"I'd love to keep you alive just for the world to see your insane self waltzing through the streets, but I don't have time to follow a measly mouse," I whispered. "Unless you can tell me something more?"

"T-That's all I know," he admitted against my finger.

"Nothing at all?" I pressed with a sinister smile. "Your pack's memories tell me differently, though you're not the Alpha."

"Beta! I'm the Beta. Our Alpha pledges allegiance to the Senator. He's far away."

"But can he feel you're approaching doom?"

"I-I-I don't know?!"

"But you do," I hummed. "You want him to find you. To come racing to your aid like a good Alpha, but he's nothing close to that, is he?"

"You...don't know that," he argued.

"Oh, but I do," I revealed as I leaned in close enough for my lips to brush my own finger. He couldn't stay still, and I couldn't blame him because my aura alone was doing everything it could to make him cower to his knees.

It would have happened if my strings of darkness didn't begin to wrap around his limbs - forcing him to remain standing while the rest of his men groaned and fell captive to my absorbing threads.

"A true leader of a pack would come to the aid of the warriors he holds dear to him. Instead, yours feels the energy being drained from each of your packmates, and you know what he's doing?" I allowed my white teeth to show as I gave him a glimmering smile. "Pulling away."

"Alpha Mathias would never!" he growled, and I could feel his wolf now, those orbs of gold seeping right in to show the world that he held power within himself.

"It's already been done," I simply answered. "Don't you sense the difference already?"

His eyes only widened as he sensed the detachment. It was rather sleek on his Alpha's part, cutting the strands of connection between each of them just at the moment he sensed they were in danger. It was a pity that this one wasn't the type to take orders, or I would have found a way to recruit him.

*Can't leave a trail for Alexandra to discover.*

"It's hard for me to admit that I actually feel pity for you," I confessed. "But this hidden side of myself cannot be discovered. You know, forbidden entities should stay within the shadows to avoid being discovered by fools who can't even see when they're being used by their own Alpha."

"He'll find you," the leader snarled.

"Oh, I'm sure of it," I agreed. "Everyone will find me when I wish to be

found. Until then, I'm an average girl with some dark magic."

With a wink, I took three steps back and allowed the man to watch me lift my arms up to my sides and draw in the remaining dark force within his unconscious packmates. He screamed as he watched their bodies fade into fragments until they were nothing but piles of ash, like I'd cremated them from the inside out.

"You evil bitch!"

"I've been called worse," I reasoned. "Any last words? Naptime is almost over."

"The Senator will find you. He'll make you his puppet and then we'll see if you'll be so cocky!"

"Me? Cocky? Coming from someone who boldly waltzed into this bar like he owned it, I think it would have been quite wise to have taken your own advice, don't you think?"

I walked backward with ease until I slid back onto my spot on the stool and relaxed my arms along the counter once more.

Crossing one leg over the other, I allowed him to admire my delighted expression as I lifted my right hand to whisper, "Tell Lucifer all about how cocky I am in hell, kay?"

"Fucking cunt-ass bit-"

His sentence ended with shrieking screams as a snap of my fingers lit him up with flames.

We watched the fire show until he was flickers of ember and ash. With a bob of approval, I leaned my head further back to see the upside-down view of Rafael.

"How much can I bribe you to give Alexandra one more special drink?"

Raf sighed. "You don't need to bribe me."

"Aww. Are you finally reassured I won't kill you?"

"No," he stoically stated.

"Aww," I pouted. "Good, because that would just be stupid."

Edwin finished the remainder of his drink before placing the empty glass on the counter.

"Aside from cleanup, I'm assuming there's a reason for you coming out to play, Queen Maeve?"

"Certainly," I replied and spun around to face the counter just as Raf somehow got me a new glass and poured the fresh, fruity, sparkly drink into it. "Wow. You're faster than I mentally gave you credit for."

"I'll accept your compliment in hopes it won't bite me in the ass later," Raf concluded.

"It won't," I assured him. "It's not my responsibility to bite your ass. That's Edwin's kink, right?"

The two of them were completely silent and I shrugged.

"I'll hook you guys up. Just you wait," I vowed.

"Don't," Raf groaned. "You did that last time by drugging our drinks."

"And you two had the best sex ever. Are you guys just playing the innocent card thinking poor Alexis is a blind child?"

Neither of them answered and I shrugged again.

"If prophecies are being spoken of my rise to the throne, things are going to get messy." I got straight to the point, knowing they would be paying attention to my next words. "I'm not ready to be discovered, so we'll play the game like we have been for the last five years. Do you both understand?"

I took a glance between them to see their obvious nods.

"Alexandra will not know until she's deemed ready for the brewing storm. There's a gambit to be initiated and I will not waste my energy interfering unless the world is literally ending. With that being said, keep a close eye on the waves and a closer eye on whoever tries to close in on Alexandra. She can handle herself just fine, but we aren't going to be playing with little boys much longer."

"Do you believe they're after your throne?" Raf asked in seriousness.

I laughed. "More than my throne, dragon wolf," I teased with a wink and

looked directly into his eyes. "Without me, my fallen world will only rise up to take its place in whatever realm will most benefit the uprising of our kind. Whether that's this world or the clockwork realms of waves is up to Moon Goddess, but one thing is clear...."

I looked to the surface of the bubbling drink and smirked.

"A war is approaching, which means it's about time we find a pack."

*By then, Alexis will be surrounded by the pillars of strength she'll need to wear this crown upon our head. That's when we'll unleash the true wrath of our vengeful flames.*

## SEXUAL GRATIFICATION

~ALEXANDRA~

"ALEXIS!"

We stilled as beads of sweat ran down our hot bodies, our swift inhales and exhales bouncing off the matte black walls of the master bedroom that overlooked the skyline. My hair stuck to my face, drenched from hours of sex, and my body burned with lust for the man pounding me into blissful oblivion again and again.

He turned us over. His back pressed against the white sheets while I sat on top of him; his cock was still deep inside me as its veiny thickness pulsed. I was impressed that he still had some stamina in him, but I couldn't keep still as the urge to move consumed me.

I lifted myself up, allowing his cock to slide out until just the tip remained. It was covered in creamy wetness from multiple orgasms and glistened in the moonlight that shone into the room. Maybe the full moon was energizing us, or maybe we were just sex-deprived shifters trying to get the most alleviation from this addictive activity of exertion and pleasure, but tonight I wouldn't allow myself to care.

Slowly, I took him in again, lowering myself inch by inch and watching



the lines of blissfulness swarm those hazelnut orbs as they admired every movement of my body. When I reached the base, I couldn't help basking in the sensational feeling - immersing myself in the feeling of fullness as my body further relaxed.

Sex was exhausting yet exhilarating, vulnerable and yet empowering. It was one of those double-edged swords, but no matter which way I looked at it, I enjoyed every bit of the ride.

*Including the mind-shattering orgasms it delivered every single time.*

"Move, Alexis," Grayson urged, and I could see the impatience in his shining spheres. Just having his cock captive within the fluttering walls of my hot pussy was driving him insane, but I had some terms and conditions he had to follow.

"Only if you call me Alexandra," I teased. I knew when push came to shove and that climax pierced through his body, he'd forget and call me Alexis, but each time I tried to remind him, to the point that it was our little gamble of odds.

"I'll try," he reasoned as he moved his hands to my hips as if to try to get me to move.

"Try and will are two different conditions," I voiced with a seductive smirk and leaned my hips slightly, causing him to groan.

"You're killing me, Alexis."

"And you're not satisfying my hearty desire because you like using Alexandra for extremely important 'are you okay' moments," I pointed out the obvious truth.

"I can't help it," he admitted, and there were those puppy eyes that always made me want to give in when we were in bed. It had to be the hormonal high sex brought to the table because it wouldn't be as easy to persuade me to do as he wanted.

*I'll allow it one more time...*

That would be a broken promise for sure, but I couldn't wait any longer. I

moved without warning, my body now possessed with the sweet urge to cum and take Grayson on the same intense ride.

"Alexis," Grayson moaned, and I knew he wanted me to go faster. My two spiked drinks from earlier had clearly rejuvenated me – *as had the quick power nap* - and though the time that followed was filled with strenuous hours of sex, this was the grand finale.

*I couldn't underperform.*

My hands glided to press against his lightly outlined abs, using them to steady myself as I moved up and down at a quicker pace. I knew Grayson was getting closer to his climax, but not from the swiftness of his grunts and moans or the way his eyes fluttered close while his fingernails dug into my flesh.

It was the way his magic always swirled around us like a summoned gust of wind, the tendrils of invisible thread spinning faster and lifting my strands up into the air. I couldn't focus on any of that as I submerged myself in my own rising build of pleasure.

The charge in the air crackled against our sweaty flesh, making me tingle all over as my moans grew louder than Grayson's. My body moved even faster, the thrumming need to cum overpowering any speck of logical thinking as my heavy panting picked up.

I'd explode at any second, and yet I wanted to cum together with Grayson - for us to come undone as if we were a unit in all aspects of life. Arousal rose, the wind spiked, the heat was scorching, and the inability to gasp for breath all came together as Grayson suddenly gripped me down so his cock was as deep as it could go.

The sudden quake of ecstasy slammed into me from the depths of my core to the massive eruption that shot through my body in a nanosecond.

"GRAYSON!" I cried out as he came not a second later.

"ALEXIS!"

I couldn't scorn the poor guy because that orgasm did enough to make my

body suddenly a noodle as I collapsed onto Grayson's chest. He expected me to crumble, catching me with open arms before he managed to roll us over with his cock still deep and slammed his lips against mine the next second.

My groan was a drawn out sound as my eyes rolled back and I let him take control. Grayson lacked that manly independence in our friends-with-benefits relationship, but boy, when he actually did unexpected moves like holding me down or something as simple as capturing my lips on his own accord, it did wonders to me that almost made me want to go into an encore.

I craved that rough touch of a man, to enjoy the way his calloused hands gripped my flesh, slapped my ass. I needed to be kissed brutally and fucked like the whole world was watching. I knew I'd never get that from Grayson. Or maybe I would once he grew more confident within himself. But for now, little things like these were blessings in disguise and I wasn't going to not be grateful for them.

He feasted on me like I was his favorite candy, while our bodies worked on calming down from our sexual highs.

It felt different - *addicting* - and though I was so tempted to take the lead of this dominating kiss, I calmed down. Maybe if I toned my boldness in general and acted more "feminine" and "submissive" he'd feel more comfortable.

*He has so much damn potential. I wish he would see it, that flickering flame that everyone acknowledges.*

I understood why Grayson humbled himself. He dealt with royals of various supernatural races, not to mention the presidents and all those of extremely high ranks in our political world. You went far when you were humble, but it also made it easy for people to walk all over you.

There was a humble part inside of me, but unlike Grayson, who wore it like a set of armor to protect himself from the negativity and uncertainty of his surroundings, I kept it deep inside for someone who deserved to witness it.

*For someone to enjoy my humble nature in the shadowy comfort of our own world of security.*

No one would be able to take advantage of you when you wore your confidence like a shield and empowerment in the form of a sword that would strike at any time.

I wouldn't deny that the trauma of losing everything forced me to be a shell of fearlessness, but I wondered if that made me cold to the rest of the world.

*Did it even matter? In this world of shadows, magic, power, and authority, all you needed was a pack to call your own.*

Edwin and Raf felt like a pack to me, but Grayson...I'd be lying if I said he did too. There was just something missing, and it pained me that we could share a bed with one another, and yet I couldn't figure out what that missing link was.

He broke the kiss so we could catch our breaths, and I moaned when he slowly pulled his cock out. Collapsing next to me, he pulled me into his arms, giving me this intimate moment. We didn't normally cuddle after sex, but there were those rare occasions like this instance where we enjoyed each other's touch even after the lust faded away.

His hand ran through my short locks as I rested my head on his chest, listening to his heartbeat, which began to slow from its racing jubilee. We didn't really need to say anything to one another, the two of us just focused on our own thoughts as time went on.

I was grateful that we'd come to his place instead of mine, having missed the tranquility his room carried within his extravagant penthouse. At some point, I drifted off, but instead of a dream, I faced something completely odd.

*"KING MAVERICK! You and Queen Magnolia can't enter that Void! You'll perish!"*

*"If we don't, no one wins, Beta Edward."*

*"You two are enemies! The queen could be bringing you into a trap."*

*The low grumble shocked me, just like the wave of tranquility that blossomed from the man's words and ran through my body like I was this very individual.*

*"My Queen of Fire would never do such a thing, Edward."*

*"You can't just trust her like that! You are the King of Frost! Mortal enemies for generations. If you sacrifice yourself and she comes out on top with the rest of those Inferno breeds.... There's too much at risk!"*

*"There's more at risk if I do nothing, Edward. If I cower in the face of this challenge, it's not just the Frost and inferno kingdoms that will perish. Our younglings will be murdered. Our homes, destroyed. Our entire existence would be wiped out, and maybe it won't be just us wolves. Ecosystems of supernatural life will be exiled all because of fear. If death is my portion, so be it. As long as it means you all will prevail and survive."*

*"But..."*

*My arm reached out and then, my large hand landed on Edward's shoulder and squeezed it firmly. "Only Magnolia and I can control the waves. This is your chance to get out of this mess and secure our people. Can't you do that for me, dear friend?"*

*His eyes filled with conflict as time ticked.*

*"This is what Moon Goddess wishes for us to do. Please, Beta Edward. Do this last request for me."*

*His hard stare ended in a sigh as he looked at me with sad eyes.*

*"For a man born to carry a heart of ice, you somehow manage to show compassion beyond words."*

*"Maybe I should thank the woman who melted away the ice exterior of my frozen heart."*

*A shared look followed with Beta Edward going on one knee and bowing his head.*

*"Know that once I've ensured the pack's safety and appointed another Beta to assist, I'll return to your side."*

*That made me arch an eyebrow as he lifted his head to look directly into my gaze. I understood his words, the hidden meaning within them, and the determination within those orbs confirmed he didn't fear the Land of the Dead.*

*"You've been the best Beta I could ask for." My raspy voice emphasized how emotional his declaration made me feel.*

*"You are the only king I'd ever follow. Whether it's in this life, or the next, King Maverick."*

*Pulling out my sword of ice, I watched the symbols of power ignite across the metal blade as I moved the edge of the sword to rest upon his right shoulder.*

*"No matter the circumstances that come our way, I anoint thee with my magic essence. Whether we start anew in this land of the living or ascend to Moon Goddess for judgment and ultimate paradise, the Universe will witness that you've served your king to the end. May our paths cross again."*

*"Thank you, Your Majesty."*

THE SOFT KISS to my lips was followed with a gentle whisper, "I'm gonna make something for us to eat." My eyes opened just slightly, and the blurry, dim image of Grayson's face came into view before he smiled and laid his lips lightly on my forehead. "Sleep a bit more."

I hoped to take him up on his offer as my eyes came to a close, but the dream I'd experienced slipped into my mind, tormenting my senses as I mentally replayed the entire thing.

*What was that all about?*

Maeve wasn't actively present in my mind, which told me she was asleep like I had been minutes earlier, but I'd have to tell her about the odd vision. It

felt like a memory of a past that wasn't mine, which made no sense.

*Is it the energy in the atmosphere that triggered such a dream?*

It could have very well been the fact that I had two glasses of that epic drink and hours of sex that made me dream of something as random as that, but who knows.

*Queen of Frost. Queen Magnolia. King Maverick. Is he the King of...Fire? No...they mentioned Inferno. I've never heard of those names before in our history.*

Prior to the falling of my kingdom, my task as royalty was learning about our past, the present knowledge, and what our future had in store for us. I knew things many would never expect from me, but that was one of my many qualities hidden by my youthful appearance.

I knew sleep wouldn't take me away again so I slowly sat up. Staring into the dimly lit room, I knew we hadn't slept for long. The sun wasn't even on the horizon yet; the night sky was still filled with stars. We must have slept for about an hour or less.

A yawn escaped me before I ran my hands through my short locks and tried to stretch. With a few cracks of my tense joints, I sighed and let my arms return to my lap. Staring down my body, I noticed the few hickeys and bruises from our obvious foreplay.

"Why am I disappointed?"

There had to be something wrong with me. No way a woman my age enjoyed rough play and got disappointed with the lack of bruises on her body after hours of sex. Sometimes I wondered if it was because I used sex to ignore the past. The heightened pleasure and moment of immense blissfulness validated my existence when my own mate couldn't do exactly that.

No matter the day, not one went by without the simple flash of those events. Those eyes of evergreen showed a glimpse of passion. The future flickered through my mind of what our lives could be now that we were

united.

*What a fool I was to believe I deserved a happy ending...*

Just the thought replayed it all. Those words of rejection that sliced through my heart, the sudden weakness in my limbs, and the nauseous suffocation that forced me to rely on his aid. Abandonment led to the flames and darkness that rushed through the halls of my castle lands, and the sight of my little brother's end plagued my shattered heart.

*All that to be spared from the hands of death by the same one who broke me.*

Like a coward, I ran for my life - running as if the distance would save my kingdom and not encourage its downfall. No matter the days that passed by, I vividly embraced the feelings of regret. Embraced the reality that because of me, my kingdom had fallen.

Watching the smoke lift into the sky of the rising sun, I vowed to never run away again. To never succumb to the fear that fought to consume me. I'd confront every enemy that came my way, even if I stood no chance of survival.

*I'd rather die trying than be labeled a coward.*

With a heavy sigh, I slowly got out of bed and decided to shower. Once I ate breakfast, I'd go back to sleep, but for now, my body craved the warmth hot water would deliver to my aching muscles.

The beads of heat beat against my flesh, encouraging a sigh from my mouth as I closed my eyes and lifted my head so I could just stand there under the luscious stream. With the increased waves, I tried to take advantage of any chance I got to shower and change my attire.

The realms within the waves varied. Some were no different from a city or town, but other places were lands of waste that hid treasures...or demons. They had expeditions and individuals who sought the waves to contribute to the mapping process that was being created in an effort to help those who could travel between the surface realm and wave realm to figure out how to



return to their destination countries without the usage of a magical teleportation stone or other methods to return to your born origin, but there was a long way to go.

Everything about the waves and clockwork, in general, had so much more to discover to even grasp its true purpose and calling in our world. Many may speculate that the slaying of the Inferno wolves triggered the waves, but who knows. These realms held so many magical artifacts, some in plain sight for those who were worthy to grasp and others hidden in the depths of the land, whether that was in the ground, a cave, a waterfall, or a volcano.

I didn't know what role I played in this "game". I didn't have responsibilities like Grayson did. I traveled into the waves to cause trouble, but it wasn't my life purpose either. I wished to take advantage of a world that not everyone knew or could control. I wished to toy with the minds of those individuals who sought superiority and respect when they knew nothing of the consequences such roles delivered.

*I need to reclaim my throne...*

Opening my eyes, I pouted my lips as if wondering why everything looked different for a second.

*THE SOFT TOUCH to my shoulders caused me to acknowledge that my slender body was more muscular and my hair was far longer than my current pink locks. I turned my head just slightly, catching a glimpse of the stone-carved shower that was filled with steam, but that wasn't what caught my attention.*

***My attention that spiked a twitch between my legs that felt as foreign as this sanctuary.***

*"What?" The woman's tender voice made the chill within my body melt away as warmth and desire sprung through me. "Didn't think I'd slip into your chambers tonight?"*

*I smiled at her comment while my eyes fought to see through the thick*

*mist and appease my vast imagination. "I did not." My voice was husky in nature, revealing just how turned on this version of myself was.*

*"Guess I must do this more often, my king," she hummed in delight as she leaned right against me - her naked body pressing against my muscular build. "King Maverick."*

MY EYES SNAPPED OPEN AGAIN, and suddenly I was back in the shower.

*What the hell?*

**"What's wrong?"** Maeve's voice drifted into my mind, sounding thick with sleep. **"Are you sleeping in the shower? I didn't think you were capable of doing that."**

"N-No," I voiced out loud but reached out to stabilize myself as I felt slightly dizzy.

**"Alexandra."** Now Maeve sounded worried.

"I'm okay," I breathed. "I think too much hot water." I turned the knob. The water came to a stop, leaving me dripping wet as I took a few calming breaths.

*Why do I feel so light-headed? What was that just now?*

**"What was what?"** Maeve pressed.

"Ugh. I don't know. I..." My words trailed off as that familiar sensation buzzed through me as my eyes widened in confusion. My head darted down to my tattoo, noticing that the inked wolf was now full of pink. "Holy fuck, what?"

I didn't even delay as I jumped out of the shower and quickly slipped on some clothes. I didn't have my usual wardrobe at Grayson's house so I opted for black leather tights and a black bralette, then slipped on a pair of fingerless gloves.

The gloves were because my hands got cold for odd reasons, something to do with my burning internal energy going everywhere else but the palms of

my hands. My fingers were blazing with magic in preparation for anything, versus the palms of my hands, which I only really needed to help physically punch someone or conjure major spells that I normally tried to avoid.

Grabbing the Timberland 6" combat heels, I slipped them on and pulled a leather jacket off the hanger before rushing to the kitchen where Grayson was already on the phone with someone.

"It's impossible. There can't be another wave. It's been a few short hours." He spoke as his eyes lifted to get caught on my outfit. He clearly was so caught up that he missed whatever the person said because he blushed and quickly shook his head. "Sorry, can you repeat that? The reception cut off."

That made me smirk before I noticed the plate of pancakes awaiting me. Thankfully Grayson was good at cooking. It wasn't like I couldn't cook, because I could - *mandatory skill as a royal in case you have guests and your maid suddenly gets ill* - but Grayson made some good pancakes, and I wasn't going to let them go to waste.

"I'm not sure I can do another expedition so soon," Grayson admitted as he watched me scarf down my pancakes like I hadn't eaten in years. The poor guy gave me a hopeless look before passing over the remainder of his.

I beamed and mouthed "*thank you*" before drowning them in maple syrup like I had mine and digging right in.

"I haven't fully recovered my magic levels. Maybe to you, it's not a big deal, but the wave realms have been getting more dangerous. I can't risk it for fun or whatever you're thinking of, and I need to be on stand-by for the royals."

There was a long pause before Grayson looked slightly ticked off. He said nothing as the person on the other side continued to speak, but from the way Grayson's eyes darkened, he wasn't liking where the conversation was going.

"I told you. I'm not introducing you to her, so drop it."

My fork with the last piece of delicious pancake paused before my lips as I really focused on Grayson. For a split second, he looked really angry, like

someone had truly upset him, but a blink later his expression was blank of emotion.

"You think I haven't heard about the shit that's going on? I'll be straight up: I don't trust you, and no way would I introduce her during these times, so it's a no. I'm hanging up."

He didn't delay in committing the deed, which left us in tense silence.

"So..." I began as I lowered the fork and reached for the glass of orange juice. "Someone wants to meet me?"

He sighed before he walked over to take my plate. I watched him as he strolled over to the sink, admiring his body that was clearly lathered with hickeys from yours truly. Thank goodness he didn't need to be like other shifters who walked in just shorts to make shifting easier or everyone would be wondering who Grayson Roman was fucking.

*I bet they would be shocked since he didn't look like the type to be with anyone right now.*

Not like I blamed them for their opinions, especially when Grayson gave off the typical 'shy boy' type of appearance. I bet his friend thought he couldn't score a woman, let alone someone like me, but I guess I saw Grayson's potential.

*I didn't mind acknowledging his weaknesses but it wasn't something he couldn't work on. It would just take time.*

"It's Eric. He's a Beta of one of the royal packs, but of course, he overheard I'm good friends with a pink-haired woman he'd love to meet." The way Grayson said it was like venom tainted his tongue.

I slid off the stool to gather the remaining utensils from the table to help wash. With a wave approaching, we didn't have much leisure time. Not to mention we'd have to go to the roof to get a clear view of which way it was coming from.

Entering waves wasn't as simple a process as many assumed. You could either race into it and face the consequences on the other side or allow it to

reach you where you'd be thrown into a "safer" condition but further away from any sort of treasures.

It basically rewarded you if you took the risk, but it wasn't always like that.

*Never know when your risky move will toss you right into the middle of a feral pack of creatures.*

"The colored-hair killers have struck again at making a useless trend," I tossed out as I reached his side to help him place the washed dishes onto the rack.

"Well, they better leave you out of it," he muttered.

"So protective of me," I purred. "You look hot with my marks all over you."

He tried to hide the way his cheeks were burning light red by reaching for the jug of orange juice to put back in the fridge - *leaving the faucet in the empty sink running.*

I decided not to tease him further, even though it was extremely tempting to do so. "Go get dressed. I feel the wave close."

"Are you going to call Edwin?" he inquired. "I'm not a hundred percent yet, but from the feel of the approaching wave, it's probably too big to avoid."

Clockwork waves depended on numerous factors: day or night, the phase of the moon, location, climate change, the list could go on and on. Crowded cities like these had various sizes of waves. Some were as big as a bus stop while others were massive enough to go through all of NYC.

Those not marked for such avenues had nothing to fear, but those with the ability to travel the waves either took the risk of venturing and lasting until another wave returned them to the present lands or attempted to avoid its path.

And then there was the rare occurrence of clockwork storms. Those were when multiple waves. It wasn't only dangerous, it also conjured up various imbalances in the universal plane. A full moon, global warming, thick

pollution, and, surprisingly, a drop in stock markets could trigger the crazy thrills of wave storms, and they just weren't pretty.

"I don't need to call him," I replied with a smile as I watched him walk to the island to retrieve his wand. He normally didn't use it unless his magic energy was actually weak enough that an assistive device to funnel the energy made things easier on his body.

*Today clearly was one of those days.*

"Why is that? I don't want him nagging me that I contributed to your dangerous behavior and got you pulled into shit."

My smirk only widened to a smile as I seductively walked over to the door, knowing his eyes would be on me the entire time. Reaching the knob, I turned to acknowledge Grayson - noticing how he simply tapped the air and triggered the flow of his spiraling wind magic to rush around him and drape his frame with fresh traditional robes.

I opened the door a second later, revealing Edwin and Raf. The two of them were in different attire from last night and looked extremely alert.

"How...actually, I won't ask," he concluded as Edwin and Raf entered the penthouse.

"No food for us? What a shame," Raf whined, but from the looks of the tray he was holding, he'd clearly brought us something.

"What's that, Raf?" I inquired as I closed and locked the door before walking around them to return to Grayson's side.

"Booster juices." He winked as he offered the tray over to me first. "Ladies first."

I rolled my eyes but accepted the offering before he moved on to Grayson, and then Edwin.

"I'm assuming you feel the approaching wave," Edwin declared, getting straight to the point.

"It shouldn't be so soon," Grayson noted. I was already drinking down the delicious green juice that tasted more like an orange popsicle spiked with

some energetic juju formula.

"Anything from the officials?" Raf inquired as he took his drink and moved to place the tray on the island. I was sure he'd retrieve it when he got back, especially since it was one of those expensive types that kept drinks at a designated temperature.

"The royals haven't said anything. One of the royal's Betas notified me, but it seems he's more interested in my pink-haired friend than another wave."

Everyone looked at me, only to find Grayson's canister was in my grasp and halfway finished. The moment of silence lingered as their eyes went back to Grayson, who now realized his drink was missing in action.

"How do you do that?" he questioned. He was genuinely curious about how I always stole his food, drinks, or anything I desired without anyone noticing until it was far too late.

"I couldn't help it," I admitted with a shrug. "This is really good."

Raf chuckled and gave Grayson his. "I figured Alexis would need an extra one, so here. Haven't drunk from it yet."

"Don't you need one?" Grayson inquired but accepted the offered beverage.

"Nah. Had the remainder in the blender. Plus, unlike you two, we actually slept last night."

Grayson's face was red in seconds, while I giggled and drank the remainder of my drink. "Shall we head to the roof?"

We all nodded before grabbing our essentials. Edwin would hold onto my items, using magic to keep them safe in a void portal that acted like a safe in another dimension. Grayson simply had a side pack that had an ancient book and his glasses that he sometimes wore.

Raf didn't need anything but himself. Dragon shifters hated carrying anything because it was a nuisance when they had to fly. And with his wolf shifter abilities, you had a man who could confidently walk naked through

the street if he wasn't so into fashion attire.

Tonight, he and Edwin were looking sharp - Edwin in a black suit with red lines to match his red tie and shoes while Rafael wore a red shirt with black graffiti, black jeans, and red sneakers.

The ways I smirked at them had Raf sighing and moving to walk next to me as we took the steps to the road.

"Whatcha grinning about, Alexis?"

"Oh nothing," I hummed in delight and leaned in to whisper, "Since when are you and Edwin dating?"

He sighed as if he knew I'd be asking the prime question while Edwin huffed. "We're not dating."

"Your matching outfits tell me different."

"Our outfits were by coincidence," Edwin fired back. I turned around as I reached the top step to give my first-in-command a brilliant, knowledgeable smile.

"Mhmm." I bobbed my head. "So you stayed over at Rafael's place, huh?"

"How do you know that?" Grayson genuinely asked as he looked at Edwin's scowling expression.

"Raf only likes wearing certain colors so if Edwin stayed over there, he usually has a wardrobe to match for emergencies," I voiced and spun around as Raf opened the door for me.

"You're such a detective," Raf concluded but didn't seem bothered by my accusations in the slightest. "He stayed over to be near you. Figured you wouldn't be going anywhere tonight with Grayson after you both came back from the previous wave, but figured staying closer would be best."

"With this new 'pink hair trend' it's for the best that we keep eyes on you," Edwin muttered. "Besides, I doubt a certain someone can protect you."

We all looked to Grayson as he reached the top step with Edwin.

"Seriously?" He gave Edwin a sad look.

"I still don't like you," he bluntly acknowledged and walked across the



roof while Raf laughed and followed - leaving me with poor Grayson.

"He'll warm up to you," I reasoned.

"You've been saying that for years, Alexis," he whined.

"Ya, but it takes Edwin a really long time to accept people. He only likes Rafael because they've known each other for eons, and he's known me since I was born. Give it another five years."

Grayson sighed, but he came to a dramatic stop, just as I did. The two of us looked to the right to see the mammoth wall of flickering orange, but something felt off.

"What the...?"

I frowned as my eyes narrowed, noticing how weirdly the colors were meshing together.

"Why does it look more like a dreadful wall of fire?" I commented as the buzz of a phone caught my attention. It was obviously Grayson's, but he paused in taking it as screams echoed through the air.

Neither of us said a word as we rushed to the ledge of the roof where Edwin and Raf already stood waiting. We were on one of the tallest luxury complexes, giving us the perfect view of the approaching wave, but the screams and sudden car alarms made my stomach drop with worry as the hairs on my arms began to rise.

**"That is not a wave."** Eve got right to the point and I felt her approach as my senses further heightened. My vision intensified, allowing me to see the odd darkness that blended well enough with the movement of orange mist to make the replica convincing, but the energy revolving around it was dreadful.

"Eve confirmed it's not a wave," I voiced. "But if it's not, what is it?"

"We've never seen that before," Raf admitted, his voice thick with concern. "Edwin?"

"Shadow magic," he confirmed right off the bat. "Not Shadow Fae magic, but forbidden magic."

"The Senator," I stated as fact as I slipped my leather jacket off. Edwin

must have predicted my move because he was by my side and offering to take the coat from me. He put it in his void storage, which honestly came in handy in situations like these.

I'd get hot shortly if things were going to get ugly so there was no need to ruin such a classic jacket.

Grayson took advantage of the moment to answer his phone that was still ringing.

"I can see what you're...what? You got through?" He paused and listened to what the other person had to say, but my senses pushed me to look behind us, and my eyes landed on another approaching wall that ignited screams in its approach.

"Shit. Two waves?"

That got the rest of them turning to look in my direction and Grayson cursed.

"There are two waves so far. They're coming from opposite directions, but when they approach, people are screaming," Grayson urged with hidden panic.

I decided to walk over to the other side, feeling Edwin on my trail. I reached the edge so I could focus all my senses on this approaching force - confirming that this, too, was a threat heading our way.

"This makes no sense," I muttered to myself and looked over to Edwin, only to notice yet another wave. "Fuck."

He frowned and followed my gaze, but he didn't say anything as I moved swiftly to the ledge and allowed Eve's energy to flow through the surface of my flesh. Having her at the edge of the surface made spotting things faster, but I could see things I'd only pinpoint in shifted form with my high-pigmented vision.

*Like the slight hues of pink mixed in the orange and specks of white and gold.*

"That one," I whispered with authority as I lifted my arm to point directly

to the wall that was going at a much slower pace than the two that had every intention of squishing us.

Raf rejoined us while Grayson was speaking in a language I recalled was for those who spoke in the ancient tongue. He had to be speaking to a royal now because only they used such language publicly.

*Which meant this was serious.*

"We won't make it by foot," Raf noted as he looked from side to side to acknowledge both walls. The screams were growing louder as cars got stuck in deadlock traffic. Some individuals resorted to jumping right out of the cars and racing for their lives.

In a city as congested as this, it felt like the damn apocalypse was going down, and it was only making me anxious to move. I didn't want to be standing here in wait for our ends.

"Grayson." I couldn't wait any longer. "We need to go. Now!"

Grayson nodded and swiftly tried to end the conversation, speaking at double the speed in their ancient native tongue while Edwin tugged at his tie to loosen it.

"Shift?" Raf inquired. From the way he was undressing, I felt like the decision was already made.

"Wolf side would be best. We could get there the fastest without drawing too much panic and interference," Edwin declared, his voice still calm.

"Cool by me. My boy could use a bit of thrilling action in his boring life," Raf admitted and looked at me. "Don't do anything stupid, Alexis."

"Now why would you assume that?" I said sweetly as I blinked my eyes for added emphasis.

"Because you're charged with my booster juice, which means you have the energy to pull off stupid shit."

"Hmm. You're not wrong," I admitted. "But I can't go against my life motto, which normally lands me in stupid shit without trying."

He shook his head, now nude. I had to admit, Rafael was clearly sculpted

by the gods, even down to his staff of commanding power, but I didn't feel anything lustful about it. Wolves were comfortable in the nude and there was no shame around the idea.

Giving Edwin his clothes to store, he started to shift first because his process was far longer than Edwin's.

"Are you sure it's that one?" he questioned me as his eyes met mine.

"I'd never lead you astray." I meant it down to my very core.

The wall of burning flames tainted with magic was far different from the true wave that was north of us. Every feeling within told me that we had to go that way. Where it would land us would be the next problem in our hands, but I'd rather deal with that than land myself, and the most important individuals in my life, dead.

"I know," he admitted with a slight upward lift of his lips. His eyes glowed to a golden flame as his body began to shift.

Grayson hung up just as Raf finished and howled into the air, the sound a definite warning to those wolves in the area to find some sort of safety. There were a few wave shelters that could aid in avoiding waves, but who knew what was coming towards us from the West and East.

*It could be the very destructive force that stole everything from me.*

Raf sat down on all fours, and it was clear who would be riding who as Grayson was pushing off the ground to land on Raf's furry back. He was massive with golden-white hair that held tinsel strands of red and orange.

He tamed the flames that ignited on his tail and paws before he rose up just as Edwin was finished with his transformation. He was completely opposite of Rafael, with his black fur being layered in red glowing threads of fur that gave him a two-tone appearance.

I knew his eyes were red with hints of gold compared to Raf's that radiated with twinkling gold. Edwin didn't howl, nor did he lower himself to the ground. I didn't struggle in the slightest as I easily pushed off the ground to land on top of his back.

It had been a good while since I'd last ridden him. It was always a last resort, an emergency way of traveling, because I disliked riding Edwin as if he were some wolf slave. I respected him in many avenues, but when it came to life and death, you had no other options but to outrun such a circumstance.

"Let's go!" I ordered. Neither of them delayed as they ran off the building. We began to drop downward, but the wind picked up, courtesy of Grayson, and was there to act further when we got closer to the ground.

The hollow screams grew louder as crowds of people began to stampede in our direction, but by the time we hit the ground, Raf and Edwin were moving at full force towards the north.

"What did they say on the phone?" I questioned the magnitude of sounds. From screams, curses, insults, and honking to the pulsing energy in the air that gave off a weird piercing noise, things were already beginning to scratch at my senses.

"Three of the royal families have regrouped in the wave realms. They experienced exactly what we are enduring now. Two waves aren't real. It's a death trap and definitely forbidden magic. They're trying to determine if this is the Senator or some sort of magical terrorist attack. They want me to enter the wave and group with them. I told them I was with important company that would need shelter. They approved."

"Until they see I have pink hair," I muttered as I shook my head and groaned. "Fuck. My head hurts."

Grayson immediately looked worried, but I followed up with, "I think it's the lack of sleep and the intensity of senses going on here."

"Hang in there," he encouraged as his head darted from left to right. "Fuck. Can we go any faster? I'm not sure we're gonna make it at this pace."

I had to assess myself to realize Grayson was on point with his observation. Both waves were a bit too close for comfort and we were only halfway to the slowly moving real wave that clearly knew nothing about what was transpiring.

"Edwin! Raf! Come closer to one another!" I ordered. They did as I asked with ease, moving like one unit while I rose up and steadied myself.

"What are you doing?"

"Place one foot on Edwin's back and the other on Rafael's!" I ordered. He seemed hesitant but he shook off his fear and rose up before working on doing the deed. He almost lost his balance, his hands reaching to hold my shoulders.

"I need you to be facing backward," I encouraged as I tried to formulate a plan within my mind. "I'll make sure you're steady."

"How is this helping with speed?" he asked as he nervously tried to turn around. I didn't blame him for his anxiety. We were moving at a good 80mph, but we needed to go a hell lot faster and he was delaying with unnecessary questions.

*Do now, ask questions later.*

"Press your back against me and then I need you to create a barrier around us. One that won't get crushed easily. That's our line of protection if I fuck up, which I won't."

"You're so bold," he huffed but finally positioned himself properly and shot his arms out. "**BARRIANA VE LA RUK!**"

I smirked at the sudden move because I expected him to ask more stupid questions. The moment Grayson ignited his magic, he went into serious 'I'm a fucking master of my element' mode. That was what I needed if we were going to pull this off.

The barrier of teal blue shot outward, making a dome around us. I waited until it solidified and Grayson lowered his arms. Glancing over his shoulder, he met my pleased grin as I bobbed my head.

"Excellent. Now, I need you to boost Raf and Edwin, which Edwin is going to dislike because he's a Dark Fae. But he can beat you up later."

"Alexis," he groaned, but clapped his hands together and briefly closed his eyes. Then he swiftly knelt on one knee, his hands of glowing gold

pressing into Edwin's and Raf's backs. The two of them howled, but it wasn't a sound of agony.

*No. It was the warning sound of thrumming power that could leave your average wolf shifter trembling in absolute fear.*

Our speed doubled at that moment, the two wolves growing even bigger as flames ignited from Raf's body while inky shadows bled off Edwin's frame. My heart was beating rapidly as the adrenaline kicked in, the intense air within our protective bubble only aiding the thrumming headache assaulting my mind.

I pushed the annoyance away, but I felt Maeve's closeness.

***"Don't fear the pain. It won't hurt you."***

Her words should have not made sense to me because to anyone else, pain's purpose was to hurt you, but I knew better - the agony I'd suffered through the years was what molded me into a stronger being.

*Chipped away the weakling who ran from her duties as queen.*

"Alexandra?"

I blinked to see Grayson's conflicted expression. I knew he was worried as fuck about me. He hadn't witnessed me having health issues since we first met and I was still getting rid of the "old" me. This wasn't the time to worry, and we both knew it.

With a defiant smile, I reached out to place my hands on his shoulders and moved in to kiss him lightly on the lips. "I'm okay. Was speaking to Eve. Focus on the barrier and boosting Edwin and Raf if you notice their energies are ebbing away. I'll do the rest."

"Are you sure?" His voice was firm and he looked deeply into my eyes.

"Positive," I assured him. "Let's survive this bullshit so we can fuck later."

There was his embarrassed face as he slowly looked away, triggering a giggle from my throat as I repositioned myself and pressed my back against his.

*Maeve, does my idea have a chance?*

***"If you start it now, yes. Those waves are gonna hit us in forty-five seconds."***

*Can't delay, then.*

All I needed was one big inhale, my mind pulling me to that very moment upon the cliff.

*Watching the remains of my kingdom. Acknowledging the helplessness I experienced at the root of that moment, followed with the striking agony it left upon my wounded heart - my broken soul.*

All my emotions drained out of me until I felt like a robot created for nothing but destruction. That cued the darkness within me, the desire to destroy and conquer flooding my consciousness until I was giggling in anticipation.

Darkness was the hardest element to control because it could drive you mad with one error of judgment, but the shadows that lived within me knew what insanity felt like. It enjoyed ripping the old me apart, destroying each strand of innocence and molding it anew with strife that would bring down a nation.

*The shadows were my best friend...and that was what made me far different than the Senator who had ruined my young adulthood.*

I envisioned two chess pieces. The knights, symbolized by a horse, were in my grasp. Without delay, I tossed them to the side, knowing they would float within our orb of energy, before I spread my arms to my sides and let my magic bleed out of me.

The very air crackled with intensity as flickers of fire began to snap into existence, embers of flames that grew and danced, while my eyes opened to reveal the heightened vision of my wolf.

Maeve was blended to the surface, her energy laid back enough to not trigger our shift but vibrant enough to come to my aid while I remained in the driver's seat of this rollercoaster ride.



***"Be free, my flames. Show them the power invested in us. Be our knights in time of difficulty, until we can make our way home to our land of flames! INFERANADO LE VE KNIGHTU RE LEI!"***

The scorching energy blasted out of me, and I felt the burning of my arm tattoo, signifying its assistance, as my hair began to levitate with energy, and the white strands among my pink ones glowed vibrantly.

The knight chess pieces began to spin around us, growing in size and moving further outward until they pushed out of the barrier and tripled in size. Their weight kicked in as they fell to the ground. Their size made us look minuscule in comparison as they stood as tall as a typical skyscraper.

I noticed the crowd of people who ran around the structure - a mother desperately trying to flee with her young child in her grasp. Someone ran into them, causing the child to trip and lose her grip on her mother, who tried to turn back.

"Delia!"

"Mommy!" she screamed as the wave was about to finish her, but the wall of desolation crashed into the chess piece's surface and remained in its spot. I had to fight off the urge to vomit as I felt the intense strain on the left side of my body. The other wave hit the right knight piece a second later, forcing me to bite my lip to muffle the threatened whimper that begged to be heard.

My decoys were created with my energy so this pain was expected, but years of training didn't prepare me for these circumstances and the ultimate strain a move like this would have on my body.

We were passing by the scene, but I moved my head enough to see the child rushing into the woman's arms and them running away. Whether they were able to find shelter before these two waves crashed would be left for the Universe to decide, but I had to return my focus to the prize.

My gaze moved to face our goal - the wave that was getting closer and closer. It would take us less than a minute to finally reach it, but my arms were already shaking violently as the full weight of both walls of intense fury

fought to diminish the single units that were stopping their mission.

"Alexis!" Grayson must have turned around because I felt his hands on my waist. Maybe that was why my knees hadn't caved yet, but I couldn't let my focus flatline or we'd be screwed. "Fuck. The wave is gonna land us somewhere troublesome," Grayson warned.

That was a bad sign. If Grayson could feel energies of power from this distance, that meant we were either going to be tossed into battle, or we were racing into an obvious trap.

*Can't turn back now.*

***"Let the flames guide us, Alexandra. They'll take us to where we're destined to go."***

There was something about Eve's voice that was different. It wasn't simply her confidence that we'd not only make it through this but were destined to survive this turmoil, but it was as if she were in a trance of her own.

It encouraged me to further let go as more energy flooded out of me to aid the knights that withheld our threats.

"Fuck. We're being followed!"

I couldn't turn my head, but if we were being followed by other civilians and potential supernaturals who hoped we were leading them to an exit, things could get ugly on the other side.

*Shit...we need to enter the wave and not be followed. We have to land in a spot that will cater to our purpose. Goddess of the Moon, deliver me to where we're destined to be. I submit myself to you and the path you've knitted for me and those connected to me to walk upon!*

We were ten seconds away, but something crashed into both knights that shattered them like they were nothing but pawns in this game of chess, leaving me in agonizing pain as I shrieked.

"Fuck! Alexis!" Grayson held me as we fell to our knees - Edwin and Raf pressing against one another to make sure neither of us slipped between them

and onto the blurred ground as they pushed themselves to their limits to get us to the end.

Screams ignited from behind us, the approaching walls of death clearly going to end the rest of them - *and potentially us* - but I couldn't help but try to figure out who'd done that. A growl of frustration escaped me as Maeve pushed right through. My senses heightened even further as we attempted to find our culprit.

*Only something tugged on our attention.*

Our eyes widened as both sides of our subconscious looked forward, and for a moment, the world around us faded entirely as we noticed a man who stood on what felt like the other side of the approaching wall.

*In this vision world, the wall was merely transparent in nature, revealing a tall man of bulky muscle with long white locks that reminded me of the snow. Azure blue eyes with irises that reminded me of snowflakes locked onto mine while his bare chest covered with various tattoos glowed with merriment.*

*He wore a cape that blew to the side as if a blizzard were passing us, only his side of the world was a snowy oasis while my approaching self carried the blaze of relentless flames. He was the Keeper of Ice while I was the Keeper of Flames.*

*The two of us were completely opposite of one another, and yet the pull between us had never been so strong, so vibrant, so desirable to our beings that begged to be unified. Nothing could stop me from reaching outward as my hand sought for him.*

*He was the lock to my key, and I wouldn't let fate end me before I discovered why.*

***Why did this man remind me of a life far different from this realm? Why did the sudden sight of him bring me immense hope? Why were we suddenly meant to be? Why...us?***

"What the fuck?!" Grayson gasped. "STOP! DON'T GO IN!"

He tried to plead, but his words were nothing but an echo in the distance as my soul pushed out strings of flames that yearned for this man. It surprised me further that he offered his large hand forward, strings of ice shooting outward until they wrapped around my spread out fingers.

My strings wrapped around his wrist and fingers, like a web entangling its prey, but our stare was intense as his lips moved to say what my heart craved.

**"Come to me, Queen of Flames."**

*That's all he had to say to tug me to him as the wave crashed into us.*

## INTRUSION AND WORTHINESS OF A COWARD

I've always wondered what it would be like to fly through the sky like a dragon, only this version of flight felt like I'd been slung by a slingshot and sent to catapult into the enemy's ship.

*Maybe that was exactly what my purpose was.*

"INTRUDER!"

No one had time to stop me - *not even my poor self* - because I crashed into someone, sending the two of us flying off whatever he'd been standing upon and plummeting into waters of pitch black.

People were screaming above the raging waters but my attention was completely focused on surviving because no way in hell did I go through that mayhem to die in some random stranger's hands.

Pushing off the person I'd crashed into, my eyes snapped open as heat thrummed through me. My orbs of fire locked onto emotionless spheres of striking blue. Their appearance alone left me speechless as I took in the man who was mere inches from me. The two of us sunk deeper into the waters that seemed to still in our wake.

The pounding fear that rushed through me dissipated while curiosity rushed upward. I couldn't feel Maeve, but it didn't seem to matter as that tugging force was still very present between us.

I decided to make the first move as I moved my arms to bring me back to

face the man in question as he simply watched me like I was some experiment that required great assessment.

Those eyes, like vibrant snowflakes encircled in magic and surrounded by the striking blue that held a mix of ocean waves and blizzard frost, were far too familiar, and yet so far from the truth.

*I know those eyes. Loved them like I had the rest of the individual. But this made no sense. None of this made any sense. Did it have to make sense?*

Reaching out, I tenderly pressed my hand against his cheek, watching as his gaze lowered to the spot I touched for a brief moment before he returned his steady gaze to meet my curious one.

*Who are you to me?*

He wasn't a mate. I'd had one and he'd blatantly rejected me. No way was this man meant for me, and yet I couldn't ignore the swarming heat that rushed through my body, the yearning feelings that bubbled through me in immense excitement, the tingling desire to unravel this mystery, and the obvious growing need for air.

My lungs that burned for oxygen decided to make it the top priority because I had no choice but to acknowledge how deep we were and the frightening burden of trying to get upward to the surface.

The touch to the side of my neck forced me to lower my gaze, but my body was tugged forward until chilled lips pressed against mine - delivering a flow of oxygen that I desperately needed to think straight a little longer.

My surprise was short-lived as the touch of this man's lips ripped through my body like a tsunami of ice, only the sweeping cold left me in heightened desire as my core flipped and my pussy pulsed to be relieved.

A mere touch of this man and I was on the verge of sexual frustration yet my touch did nothing to this man of muscle, calm, and mystery.

*Fuck. Is this guy an incubus or some shit? No. He's not. I know he's not...but what the fuck?*

With the break of the kiss, I watched as the corners of his lips crept

upward, and I literally gawked at the sight of his slight smile.

*I'm an idiot!*

I quickly closed my mouth. His smile only widened at my stupid mistake that resulted in a bunch of dark water entering my mouth, but something suddenly spun around us - emerald green fish that spun and spun until we were being lifted upward like a whirlpool and spat right out of the sea.

I couldn't even scream as my body flipped and flipped, but I surprisingly didn't need to worry about crashing into the ground because I was caught in large arms - the arms of the snowflake man as he'd easily landed on the wooden surface and expected to catch me a second later.

"ALPHA MAXIMUS!" multiple men declared as one man specifically marched up to us. The anger etched in his face should have frightened me to the core, but instead, it made me want to laugh because he looked so upset, his whole face was red.

"This skank of a bitc-" My lips puckered and I couldn't stop myself as a stream of dark water rushed out of my mouth and right into the face of this man.

No one said a single word as I slowly covered my mouth with my hand and watched as the astonishment of my actions flooded the expressions of the armed men around us while the poor victim of my unexpected assault stared at me with wild eyes filled with shock.

***"I wake up to you unintentionally plotting our murder. Marvelous. I'm not surprised though,"*** Eve declared and from the sound of it, she really wasn't surprised in the slightest regarding my current circumstances.

*It...wasn't my fault?*

***"Mhmm. The water just came from the sky,"*** Eve concluded. ***"Might as well roll with it."***

"Oops." I decided to break the silence. "My bad."

All that did was make the man literally quiver with rage, but someone lost themselves in hysteria. My attention was drawn to a muscled giant with

vibrant green hair.

"Goddess of the Moon certainly loves to bring entertainment right to my door! Or should I say ship?" He went on another tangent of laughter as he reached where we were. "You should watch your insults, Alpha Surge. You can't insult our Goddess's gift from the wave, now can you?"

"She attacked Alpha Maximus and you're standing there laughing?! She's a skan-" He tried to finish but a splash of water hit him in the face, silencing him once more.

All eyes moved to me, but I was now focused on looking up at Alpha Maximus. His eyes were on me, just like everyone else.

"You're pretty up close, you know?" I pointed out with immense approval. He didn't say anything, but he didn't have to as the other man laughed once again.

"Fallen Beauty, that's not how you get out of deadly situations," he barked in glee.

I pouted my lips innocently and looked over to the man, who held a cigar. Of the three major men that looked to be Alphas, he was the biggest in structure. He stood at 6'7" in height but because of his broad stature, he looked like a giant. He wore a fitted black top that practically bulged at the seams and wore tights that resembled the material fishermen would use to ensure the skin beneath their clothes remained dry.

His emerald green hair was curly and short while his eyes carried a slight familiarity to the shade of evergreen, only his held a twinkle of gold. Those bulky arms held various tattoos, and he wore a single golden ring on his fourth left finger.

I innocently shrugged. "He deserved the second one," I admitted with no remorse. "I know my worth and no way am I anything close to a skank."

"I agree, Fallen Beauty," he cheered as he reached us. "Alpha Surge, you should be kinder to our unexpected guest."

"She could have killed Alpha Maximus, Alpha Rogue!" Alpha Surge



snapped back.

All he did was laugh before returning his joyous eyes to me.

"Please, call me Richard," he encouraged and looked back to Alpha Surge, who would surely pop a few veins at this rate. "From my observation, she looks rather comfortable in his arms."

That forced everyone to look back at us, and I took the opportunity to wrap my arms around his neck and grin proudly. "You're right. I like it here. How about everyone else leaves us alone for a moment. I've got questions."

Alpha Maximus had no complaints, which lead to Alpha Surge huffing like crazy and Richard laughing once more.

"SIR ROGUE! The lands are up ahead but enemies are approaching!"

That got our attention as we all followed to where the man was pointing. I had to narrow my eyes to see the approaching ship. It looked more like a boat to me, but it was crammed with at least ten individuals - one clearly having some sort of sorcerer abilities while the rest were shifters.

One sniff of the air told me they were wolves, but from their rising auras, they didn't seem normal. *Possessed in nature?*

"I guess you've been sighted, Fallen Beauty," Richard declared with a shake of his head. "This is gonna be tricky. I already sent Beta Eric to aid a colleague."

*Beta Eric has to be the one Grayson was speaking to.*

"We have no other sorcerers on deck, Sir," one of the men noted.

"Why do you need one?" I decided to ask and was more surprised that Alpha Maximus was still holding me.

"That sorcerer is gonna be a pain when we're on a ship. This journey wasn't planned, but alas, we're here, and very unequipped for long-distance combat."

"Who did the spinning fish thingy?" I inquired.

"Me, Fallen Beauty, but that's last resort magic," he revealed with a wink.

"Alpha Maximus, can't you reach them from this distance?" Alpha Surge

demanded.

"Not with that tone," I casually pointed out, which actually made a few men snicker while Alpha Surge was clearly plotting my murder.

"What about this?"

I decided to let go of the delicate man of muscle as I slipped out of his grasp to land on the wooden floor. Whatever that kiss had done to me at least gave me a bit of a boost of energy - enough to cause some major damage if I focused hard enough.

I'd have to figure out where I was in the wave realms and how far I was from Grayson, Edwin, and Raf. Wouldn't be hard, but if I ran out of magic, I'd need a few hours to rejuvenate.

Walking a few steps away from the group, I spun around once to dry my wet clothes, which did its job of grabbing their attention, before I faced them with a confident smirk.

"Since you've most kindly accepted me on your ship after I was thrown into one of your superiors, I'll gladly aid you by being a substitute sorceress for this confrontation."

"You think because you know how to dry your clothes that you stand a chance against this group of bastards?!" Alpha Surge snapped.

"Why yes," I replied and calmly walked over to where Richard stood. "Can I borrow your cigar, Richard?"

"Most certainly, Fallen Beauty," he replied with a wide grin and offered me the rolled bundle. I took it into my grasp, and Alpha Surge literally huffed and stomped right towards me. He was the same height as me with my heels at 5'9", though he was definitely the shortest amongst the three Alpha men.

"And what are you going to do with a cigar, intruder?"

"You'll see in a moment," I assured him, not afraid of his obvious challenge. I wanted to laugh as he attempted to belittle me with his Alpha energy, but I didn't like the tense feeling the approaching boat brought with its closeness.

"Your attempt to make me submit isn't going to do anything," I bluntly declared while my eyes remained on his. I took a long inhale as my lips curled at his obvious displeasure, blowing out the puff of smoke to the side - *instead of his face, which I was extremely tempted to pull off.*

"I'm not here for your approval, let's make that clear," I whispered, and felt Eve at the edge. "I'll aid you in exchange for six hours in your company to rest safely. After that, I'm gone."

The man scoffed and I noticed the way his eyes darkened to a striking orange with daunting hues of gold. "What makes you think-

"Agreed."

My eyes didn't need to move to know who had answered, his sensuous, rich voice sending my hormones into overdrive while my mind wished to envision what it would be like to hear that very voice beneath the sheets.

*With his hand around my throat as he rammed into-*

***"Imagination is for when we're alone, Alexis,"*** Eve encouraged. ***"I believe you forgot other Alphas can sense when you're aroused."***

*Ah. Right. Bad. Totally bad. But his voice.... Yum.*

"Alpha Maximus! She's a stranger! She could be a part of them," one of the armed men reasoned. That made me laugh before I walked away from their group towards the front of the ship. The actual ship wasn't super big, enough to take a small crew.

It had to have been created with magic because the wave realms were far too unstable to manage such property. One day these very lands could be nothing but dry land for miles and the next could be a sea of waters like the one we rode upon.

Either way, I didn't care. This small group of prey would be perfect practice for my aerial magic. I knew the rest of the group was following close behind - the armed men's weapons still up as if I were going to make a wrong move and kill their Alphas.

"You guys should learn the difference between an ally and a foe," I

voiced as I reached the edge and began to stretch my arms. "Oh. One last thing."

"What now?!" Alpha Surge demanded. "You've requested enough!"

"My safety includes not being sold to the Senator, who's now into pink-haired girls," I voiced and looked over my shoulder and pointed to my black roots. "It's hair dye."

"What if I decide you're a threat?" Alpha Surge spat back.

"Then I'll sink this ship and kill everyone in it," I casually declared with an added shrug. I didn't care about his reaction as I turned away from him. "Though I kinda like Richard's personality. I'd keep him, and Alpha Maximus would be a bonus cause he's hot as fuck."

Richard lost it as his laughter literally echoed across the ship. The poor man might as well have made the approaching threat believe we were mocking them because the sorcerer was now at the front of the ship and preparing his attack against us.

It didn't bother me as my hands began to tingle with heat while my tattoo on my right arm began to burn with power.

*Eve? Wanna have some extra fun?*

***"Thought you'd never ask. For the safety of everyone here, you'll have to be in the driver's seat."***

*Sure.*

A howling call pierced through the air - a final warning of an approaching attack. I sensed the spike of tension but it only contributed to the boiling excitement thrumming through my veins as I mapped out my attack in my mind.

Lifting the tip of the cigar to my lips, I enjoyed the deep inhale, closing my eyes and inviting the smoke to rush down my throat and into my lungs. To others, this toxic substance would be considered bad, but it had the opposite effect for an Inferno wolf.

*A very deadly weapon that no one would ever expect.*

***"Let the real games begin,"*** Eve purred, triggering her energy that rushed into the driver's seat and forced me to take the spot where I could feel and observe everything without needing to mentally think of what move was next.

Removing the cigar from our lips was followed with the release of the smoke in our grasp, only it didn't just enter the atmosphere and drift away. It doubled in magnitude as it rushed outward like a stream of smoke shooting away from an active fire - the smoke spreading far quicker than anyone could expect.

The cries of our approaching threat only confirmed that our little magic trick worked brilliantly as the ship and everything around it was covered in intense smoke. The escalation of coughs and grunts came from afar and made a smile taunt our lips while we turned to walk over to where Richard observed with an impressed look.

"How?" I heard an armed guard ask, probably questioning why this smoke wasn't assaulting their senses and forcing them to cough as we could clearly hear from the enemy's boat.

I offered the cigar back to Richard instead, and he noticed the difference in my orange eyes that were surely pierced with pink, gold, and hints of dark teal.

"Expensive brand. Good taste," I praised and looked over to the guard who'd asked the simple question. "That's a little secret, but just know this lovely smoke makes it easier to do what I'm about to do."

"Hmph. All you've done is hide our ship like a damn coward."

"Alpha Surge," Richard said in warning, but I walked away once more like the single word spiked anger within me. If I wasn't careful, that rage would simply spill onto this ship and burn it all to the ground.

*I don't have a cowardly bone left within me.*

"Alpha! INCOMING!" I already knew what was approaching and that kicked me into gear as I took two rushing steps forward before pushing off

the ground to the rail of the ship and then pushed off the golden metal to give myself leverage as I soared upward.

"What is she doing?!" someone screamed, but no one answered as I spun my body around in time to kick the meteor of fire that was headed straight for the ship. The mere impact surged an aftershock that pushed away the smoke momentarily, allowing everyone on the ship to see the threat that would have left the ship in sinking shambles.

The meteor was sent back to where it came from as my body began to drop towards the waters, but my hands moved as I snapped my fingers. The move kindled flames at my fingertips that began to multiply until they combusted into rings of fire that began to spin around me until it was a blur of fire that slowed my fall until my combat heels touched the surface of the water.

*Then we moved in a blur of flames as cracks of bones confirmed our shift.*

I didn't expect us to shift, since doing so opened the world around us and the dangers in these lands of shadowed desolation. But our eyes were on the prize that approached, and our body reached them in no time.

Their screams were like music to my ears as we rushed to destroy their fragile flesh with our teeth and enjoy the taste of the metallic blood that flooded into our mouth and down our parched throat.

One head was gone, a limb next for the devouring. Two legs were tossed into the air and an entire body was set ablaze before I used my back feet to kick them like a bull, fifteen feet away into the ocean. By the time my raid of flames was over, only the sorcerer was left as he chanted words that fought to control my senses.

I felt the darkness creeping into my mind, the desire to take control of me and use my brilliant powers against my temporary allies. It was rather amusing, honestly, and I went with it as I stilled on the ship and watched the glee that flooded his dark eyes.

*Poor fool.*

He lowered his arms, which was his ultimate mistake. My eyes twinkled with enough mirth for him to catch on, but I was already moving and ripping him to shred as his screams echoed around us.

The screams turned into whimpers, then gurgles that finally drifted into silence. We left his limp, deformed body on the boat, inspecting his remains before I stretched while Maeve decided to shift us back. With ease, I was back in my human form and was in complete control once more, before snapping my fingers yet again.

The flames wrapped around me until I was cloaked in a black cloth that smelled like ash. By the time the flames extinguished, I wore a simple black dress.

"Hmm. It's a good thing I have ten pairs of those combat boots or I'd be sad," I muttered to myself while I looked at the approaching island. With a sigh, I ignored the creeping headache and decided it was time to get back to the ship - especially when the smoke was beginning to clear up.

Reaching the edge of the boat that would literally turn into ash the moment I jumped off it, I noticed the single snowflake floating in the water. It was large enough to be the size of my foot yet solid enough to jump upon.

I had no doubt in my mind as I lightly pushed off the boat to land on the snowflake that crystalized and ignited the floating platforms of snowflakes that headed back to the ship. The smoke was still dense enough to prevent the crew from seeing this blessing in disguise, so I took every advantage of it as I began to swiftly move from snowflake to snowflake until I used the last snowflake as the leverage I needed to soar upward and land on the golden rail I'd jumped off of.

The armed men, some crew members, and the three Alphas stood there in shock of my return - though Richard simply looked pleased while Alpha Maximus was still as emotionless as ever. His eyes told me another story as I noticed just a spark of relief in them, but my gaze returned to the middle man as I jumped down with my bare feet and waltzed over until I was in front of

Alpha Surge.

Our height difference did nothing to belittle my confidence that rose to the surface along with my Alpha power as Eve suddenly rushed forward to the point that the atmosphere was sizzling with heat. The grunts that followed came from the armed men and crew until they were all on their knees.

That clearly shocked the Alphas as even they struggled to not do the same, and by my swift observation, only Alpha Maximus wasn't struggling with my current test, which only confirmed one thing.

*He's definitely royalty.*

Alpha Surge gritted his teeth while his eyes blared with defiance, but I snapped my fingers, which had one of the crewmen at our side as I took a step back. He swiftly went on his hands and knees for me to step upon.

I normally wouldn't have done something as dehumanizing as this, but we weren't currently playing to human morals. This was a warning that needed to be instilled here and now, and I wanted to make my statement loud and clear.

I stepped upon the man with ease as another crew member was on my right side bowing his head in wait for me to finish.

Poor Alpha Surge surely wished to get rid of my existence now, but I'd make sure this type of confrontation wouldn't repeat itself.

"Feel free to insult me whenever you want, or undress me in that dirty mind of yours, but one thing I'll state here and now: I am **NOT** a coward. Nor will I ever submit to someone like you. A man worthy of such will have a far higher purpose than being a side character in this thrilling adventure of my life, so I suggest you keep your opinions to yourself for I'm not your entertainment channel. Six hours of safety and privacy and I'll be out of your way and back to my chaotic life. Go against that, and I'll ensure everything you cherish will be burnt to ash by my very flames. Understand, Alpha?"

He couldn't help but tremble from the heat waves that assaulted him, but he gathered the strength to answer me.

"Understood."



Eve took an extra moment to stare at him before she pulled back and took her intense energy with her. I laid my hand in the offered crew member's and got down as they both bowed as if I were the royal captain of this ship.

Turning my attention to Richard, I smiled proudly. "Threat eliminated. Can I go rest now?"

"Certainly!" he cheered. "Alpha Maximus, would you please escort...actually, I'd love to know our Fallen Beauty's name."

"Alexis," I replied. "Call me Alexis."

"Please escort Alexis to the sleeping chambers to rest. I'll guarantee your safety, so please rest. It won't take long to reach land but we'll spend the remainder of the night on the ship until disembarking."

"Excellent," I replied and walked over to where Alpha Maximus was. I expected him to take the lead, but he observed me for an added second before he surprisingly offered his hand. Why the gesture made everyone freeze in shock would be something to unravel when I'd rested, because I couldn't pull off this confidence stunt much longer.

Placing my hand in his, I felt the shocks of energy rushing through our touch, and for a moment, I truly did feel safe enough to rest.

"Lead the way, Alpha," I encouraged.

He did exactly that, which left me wondering what would happen behind closed doors.

*Maybe I'll be able to unlock something I never knew was hidden from me.*

## ALPHA OF FROST AND TEST WITHIN HER DREAMS OF SORROW: PART ONE

**T**he nagging pounding continued to assault me as I stood there tuning out the crewman's determination to get the sleeping quarters to "sleeping" standards.

The poor man was working so hard to move the piled shit they had placed right in front of the tiny cabin that was clearly deemed 'worthless' considering the never-ending pile of ship stuff.

Ropes, barrels, a spare anchor, and weapons were the stuff I recognized, but at this rate, I'd sleep on the floor if it meant I got to shut my eyes for a few long minutes.

*Fuck. I'd need a few hours at this rate.*

I'd pushed my limits with showing off, especially after having done many deeds in the last wave and having a few short hours which I used to my advantage to fuck Grayson and scarf down breakfast. And I wasn't even analyzing how draining the events prior to entering this wave were.

As of now, I was officially out of commission magic-wise, which wasn't a good problem to have in a new territory on a ship filled with only men. I knew while I slept, Maeve would at least be alert until my magic replenished enough for my senses to wake me up if need be.

A glimpse of my tattoo told me we'd be stuck in this clockwork wave for a while, which could be very good or very bad if I didn't regroup with the rest

of my "pack". I wasn't necessarily worried about Edwin or Raf. Edwin knew how to take care of himself, and truthfully, no one would be stupid enough to battle him in this realm.

*Dark Fae in their true forms are dangerous fuckers.*

As for Raf, he was pretty threatening himself when in unfamiliar territory, which was the wave realms in a nutshell. It didn't matter if you claimed the land for yourself. Each time you returned to that very land, it would be different in some shape or form. It was one of the reasons why these realms weren't for the weak.

I worried about Grayson because he'd used a good chunk of magic trying to protect us, but I was hoping he hadn't been separated from Edwin and Raf. If they were together, they would be perfectly fine and eventually find me.

*All I had to do was survive until they found me.*

"I think this will take longer than expected, Alpha Maximus," the man finally admitted as he dripped sweat. "I'd gladly ask to vacant one of the crew sectors?"

"Not necessary. Instead, can you go into the storage and ask Dinero to gather some black cloth?"

"Certainly, Alpha!" He didn't delay as he rushed out of our sight to head to the deck.

Letting out the sigh I'd been holding, I leaned back against the wall, feeling light-headed as I simply tried to focus on breathing.

"I really don't mind sleeping on the floor, Alpha." I didn't mean to mutter, but damn. I hadn't felt this drained since the first after-wave experience. I recalled the shocking pull that sent us back into the heart of NYC.

Thank goodness Edwin was with me because my blood pressure dropped like I hadn't eaten for days and he'd caught me before I'd slammed into the cold pavement of whatever alleyway we'd landed in.

I'd awakened in the bed of my penthouse suite that was supposed to be temporary but ended up being our "home" for the last five years. It was the

beginning of our adventures to retrieve the throne I'd lost - to discover the hidden secrets of the waves and their connection to my fallen home, pack, and, ultimately, royal heritage.

If only that bed were here at my disposal. I'd sink into the soft mattress and allow the threatening hands of darkness take me away to the land of dreams and peaceful slumber.

The idea was far too tempting, but I knew it wouldn't come true tonight. As of now, it was about survival. It took me a second to realize two important things: I was no longer leaning against the wall, and my nostrils were filled with the mixed scent of pine and roasted chestnuts.

It reminded me of Christmas long ago at the castle, when children would giggle and sing carols in halls filled with the sweet aroma of baked goods. The thrumming heat greeted you the moment you entered the tall stone walls, while the chilly breeze and snowy paradise were outside.

The chilled breeze felt marvelous after a morning of studies, inviting the scent of pine, chestnuts, burning wood, and various other scents that always delivered a smile to my face.

The memory only encouraged me to open my eyes, even though they felt so heavy to me. I noticed I was being laid onto a soft surface, the sinking motion short-lived as my body relaxed at the comforting acknowledgment that I lay in the softest bed ever.

I wanted to look around, but all I could manage was staring at the intriguing ceiling - the dancing movement of orange mimicking the movement of burning flames in a fireplace. The captivating motions only continued to hypnotize me as my lids grew heavier and heavier.

It was becoming clear that I'd lose this battle, but I feared exactly that. I may have proven myself and been guaranteed safety, but was it enough? My trust issues played a lead role in this debate, but as the seconds ticked away and the shadow figures of dancing illumination continued their waltz upon the ceiling, I couldn't help but let my worries fade away along with my

consciousness.

Slipping, slipping, slipping away, I was struggling with the idea of truly submitting myself to the state of vulnerability. A blanket covered me, and I wondered if my magically created dress still survived after the plunge in my magic essence.

It wasn't surprising that the last twenty-four hours, if not longer, was finally catching up to me. I'd thought I was a battery that would never run out of juice, but here I was after intense chases, crazy battles, thrilling sex, spiked desperation to survive, and proving my worthiness.

All of it made sense, and this rest was precious because who knew if I'd have another opportunity. But would this be a great mistake like the one I made by running away, allowing my fear to override my duty to aid my kingdom?

*Would falling asleep lead to a great mistake that would plague me for the rest of my life?*

A tender touch pressed against my forehead, and I used every string of strength to keep my eyes slightly open to see the culprit of the calming touch.

**"Sleep,"** the deep rumble of authority whispered. How I wished to defy those very words, especially with the hovering power, but they were followed up with far more tender words of encouragement, **"No one will hurt you when you're by my side. Absolutely no one."**

Those words of comfort were filled with so much truth, leaving my body no choice but to obey as my eyes finally closed and I was lost in the warm embrace of slumber.

*Who is this Alpha of Frost?*



**~ALPHA MAXIMUS~**

"I THINK this will take longer than expected, Alpha Maximus. I'd gladly ask one of the crew members to vacate one of the crew sectors?"

"Not necessary. Instead, can you go into the storage and ask Dinero to gather some black cloth?"

"Certainly, Alpha!" The sweaty crewman scurried quickly away to get the deed done after spending far too long trying to remove the piled amount of unnecessary junk that blocked what should have been the guest cabin for emergencies.

In the few clockwork waves we'd experienced in the past, only three occasions had called for us to sail upon murky waters filled with the forbidden creatures of this domain, but the previous two occasions were far better than this last resort move.

I couldn't be too harsh on Beta Eric for creating this ship on short notice. The wave was as sudden as the attacks in Toronto. The first Alpha conference with the Canadian wolves suddenly went astray due to the random walls of flaming darkness that forced us to swiftly make our way down to New York before colliding with a real wave.

With how big our pack and reinforcements were, we'd luckily all survived the strenuous run, and I was even more impressed that we'd been able to reunite with Alpha Rogue. I wasn't too pleased with Alpha Surge's attendance, but could I really be picky in life and death situations like these?

No matter our differences in status and breeds, we were all wolf shifters and deserved to live. That left us no choice but to work together, even if my patience with Alpha Surge's short temperament was running thin.

I'd been trained many years prior to expect the unexpected, so the sudden waves of death weren't as frightening as they should have been. I knew death wouldn't be my portion to face tonight, but what I hadn't expected was my mind to be plagued with a life I couldn't quite figure out.

The flashbacks, dreams, and vivid memories had begun five years ago. I couldn't recall what really triggered them, but they started with just dreams.

Images of a life where I wasn't the prince and future heir of the Kingdom of Frost.

I certainly wasn't a man in these memories, which was what threw me off with these dreams that shifted to vivid flashbacks as years went on. With the various input of royal assessors and medical professions, it was determined I was enduring the sights of my past life, which only emphasized my royal status.

Many royals of extremely high positions in this world were reincarnated rulers from the past. It normally occurred with Fae and dragon shifters, and wolf shifters were far rarer when it came to reincarnation.

There weren't as many royals as one would assume compared to standard Alphas of packs. Royalty was considered a blessed gift from our Goddess of the Moon, and to be born with royal blood was the highest honor and blessing the Universe of Moonlight could place upon a family and their designated pack.

I was born into the Atlas family of the Compass Pack, the last born of four children. Our births were based on directional planes, and my birth was predicted because only the North directional plane hadn't been claimed.

*North stood for the ultimate ruler and thus my royalty was not only anticipated but confirmed by our pack Seers.*

It was intriguing that this sudden change of events hadn't been predicted in the slightest, which only meant this was a deliberate attack that was completely uncalled for. It was executed suddenly, with the intention of harming far more supernaturals than humans.

It had to be another supernatural who would have pulled this off because no matter how selfish and power-driven humans got at times, they actually tried to respect the balance between our worlds. This move wasn't close to respecting such values, and if the extent of damage was worse than what was being predicted, I worried the consequences would be far too dangerous to be in anyone's favor.

The soft sigh that came from behind me stole my attention as I moved my head enough to catch a glimpse of the woman patiently waiting behind me.

"I really don't mind sleeping on the floor, Alpha."

The sudden new arrival was now leaning against one of the pillars down here, looking completely miserable as lines of exhaustion etched into her face.

I'd given her bonus points for somehow managing to remain on her feet after pulling off that grandiose show of dominating power in exchange for safety and a few hours of our protection. We'd yet to hear her story or how she'd suddenly catapulted into these parts of the wave realms - *or managed to crash right into me* - but I knew better.

*I could feel the connection I'd craved to piece together.*

The flashbacks weren't simply triggered by the sudden change in the world or the first experience of the clockwork waves. Trauma that ripped me apart had been the topping on this cake of change but compared to the agony that experience delivered in its wake, at this moment it felt like a blessing because I'd found a potential queen.

*Or my past lover...*

A normal person would have replied by now, but there were a few things I preferred not to do so swiftly, one of which was talking.

Speech was meant to be used with wise calculation, a trait I'd taken from my father. My older brothers had all taken the traits of our mother, which encouraged their rowdy banter and lack of patience.

I enjoyed analyzing my environment and circumstances if I was privileged to do so, and this current moment was an opportunity I'd take advantage of because this woman's beauty alone could take one's breath away with a simple sight of her.

Never would I have expected someone to look so stunning underwater, but she'd been able to shine brightly against the dark waters as we'd drifted within their unsafe boundaries. It was the first time I'd been so captivated by



someone after I'd "changed" for the better.

From her stunning face of attractiveness to her style of clothing, I'd taken in the woman with striking pink locks with black roots and white tinsel highlights, those dark lips of red pigment, her heart-shaped face, her flawless skin, her light makeup, and most importantly, those spheres of orange shimmer that took my breath away.

She was definitely shorter than me without the black combat boots with a thick heel contributing to her height before she righteously defended us, but there was something about her being 5'3" versus my 6'4" height that turned me on in a peculiar way.

*As if her very existence wasn't turning me on.*

I was thankfully thinking straight and ignoring the way my wolf was pressing for me to claim what was rightfully ours, but between the two of us, I was surely the patient one and we needed to be cautious because there was something that told me this woman had gone through something to force her to build up those walls of confidence.

My observation wasn't attempting to try and excuse her empowerment, but I noticed the switch that was triggered with the single word that Alpha Surged tossed out in anger.

*Coward.*

That was the trigger that made this woman's aura go from barely present to a blazing force that made goosebumps trickle across my arms. I was sure only myself and Alpha Rogue noticed, and maybe it was for the better because if Alpha Surge had noticed such a dramatic change in her energy, he would have never been "okay" with granting her safety.

*She was overpowered, which meant she was either royalty or worked with some extremely high-up individuals who trained her in the capability to make anyone kneel to her desire.*

It was only now as she leaned against the wooden surface of the pillar that I saw a woman of fragility. Her slightly tanned skin looked extremely

pale and her aura was nonexistent. Exhaustion was painted all over her face, even with her eyes closed, and I was simply amazed that she was still standing.

A spike of worry flickered in the pit of my stomach as I noticed her waver. She probably didn't realize she was falling asleep, and again, I couldn't really blame her. Anyone else would have surely fainted by now, and yet she was fighting to be present until it was safe for her to allow herself the reward of sleep.

*My wolf disliked this and I guess I did, too.*

Without a second thought, I was in front of her in two steps. "Alexis."

Saying her name sent shivers through me while the brief moment underwater resurfaced in my mind. The touch of her hand against my cheek had ignited feelings I hadn't experienced in many years, and though it frightened me just slightly, I yearned for another chance to be the subject of her curiosity.

*To be close in proximity to her burning radiance.*

Even though she was right in front of me, worry overrode the lust I was carrying for this woman. There were multiple emotions trying to take first place in the ranking, but I wasn't going to be ashamed of the levels of craving this woman ignited within me, nor would I push aside the imaginative scenes of what I'd enjoy doing to her.

"Alexis," I repeated her name, but she remained still as her inhaled and exhaled slowed further. She was clearly drifting and as much as I internally wished to not fall so hard for this stranger, I couldn't fight the sudden need to protect her.

To shield her from the cruelties of this world of darkness and uncertainty while hoping rejuvenation would give me the chance to actually speak to her privately.

*To try and figure out whatever this was...*

It was becoming clear that she needed to rest and I personally didn't like

the idea of her sleeping in the crew's corridors. With such attractiveness attached to her slim-waisted body, slightly curved hips, and perfectly perky breasts, it wouldn't end well.

Not because of the attire she wore that hugged her body so flawlessly, but because wolf shifter nature struggled with the simple acknowledgment of consent. Everything was blamed on clothing, circumstance, spiked adrenaline, or lustful aromas that triggered their behavior to fuck whatever moved, but this woman deserved far better.

She deserved to be worshipped like a goddess with rough lips against her flesh, to be bathed in kisses of passion and touched with immense fascination. She deserved to be pampered like a queen, loved like she was the only woman of the lands, and drowned in pleasure by someone who accepted every piece of her – *good and bad*.

Here and now, I wanted to be that fateful person, but it required patience and discovery.

With that in mind, I ignored the throbbing tightness in my boxers and moved to scoop Alexis into my hold. I did it slowly in hopes of not waking her. She was so fucking small in my muscled arms.

Up close, she looked even more outstanding with a dose of ravishing delicacy, and I couldn't help but notice the way her nipples poked through the black cloth she'd created with a pinch of magic.

I knew if I didn't hurry, the very piece of fabric would fade away because that was what happened when your body ran out of energy. It had to conserve power, and that meant anything related to the designated supply had to disappear to compensate.

My movements were silent and swift as I maneuvered my way to one of the three master suites. I was a little grateful that two of them - *mine and Alpha Rogue's* - were on this end of the ship because I wouldn't need to deal with confrontation from anyone else who would potentially try to rile things up while Alexis was down.

I wondered if that was her true name. It felt more like a nickname than anything, but I wouldn't know for sure until I unraveled every piece of her. The mere thought made my lips quirk while my cock twitched in anticipation.

This really would become troublesome if I didn't get my arousal under control. I hadn't been this turned on in years, and what intrigued me most was the reality that I hadn't felt like this with my destined mate.

*That betrayer.*

Shaking away the thought, I reached the room and easily opened it with a hint of magic. It was a good thing I'd been trained by one of the best magicians in the world, since many of those various skills aided me through these years of discovery in the wave realms.

This world was still new to us, and many areas were undiscovered. It may not have been our purpose to find every corner this world of change delivered, but it felt good to be able to defend ourselves and use magic to aid in both complicated or simple tasks.

Walking straight to the made bed as the door closed behind me with the added sound of the lock turning into place, I laid the fierce beauty onto the soft sheets. Her body seemed to relax immediately, the tension beginning to bleed out of her muscles while the scrunched lines in her face began to smooth out.

I could tell she was attempting to stay semi-awake. The idea of slumber frightened her to the point that I could feel it without using my heightened abilities. I didn't blame her in the slightest, and though we'd guaranteed her safety, I was sure many others had promised to do one thing and decided to do another.

*I had too much pride to go against my promised word.*

Alpha Rogue was no different. I was sure he was nearby, waiting for me to ensure Alexis was comfortable and safely placed in an area that didn't invite trouble. I'd have to seek him afterward.

Walking over to the closet, I pulled out a blanket and returned to lay it

upon her body as the black fabric began to disintegrate into tiny glowing orange orbs. Covering her up in time, I got a simple glimpse of her chest, which was far too much for me to handle.

It took me biting my lip hard to control myself once more, and I mentally cursed before I decided to give in to speaking to my wolf.

*Can you turn down your arousal by a fuckton?*

***"As if I'm the only turned-on fucker on this ship."***

How tempting it was to roll my eyes at his bullshit excuse, but I decided to ignore him seeing as he did proceed to calm his fucking testosterone down a few notches for the sake of my damn sanity.

I noticed the sudden spike of worry in her expression as well as the slight rise in rigidity when I tried to back away. I wasn't sure if it was because of my desire to depart or Alexis's internal concern about losing consciousness in this foreign place.

She needed sleep or she'd get sick, and we couldn't have that right now. With the abrupt arrival of the wave, I wasn't sure when we'd return to the realms above, which meant we had to keep in decent health until then.

*Or at least until Eric arrived and performed an analysis of her.*

It made me wonder whether she was a part of a pack of some sort. For some odd reason, it didn't feel that way, which had to be impossible because all royals had a pack. You were raised to rise to the throne when the opportunity came, which was exactly why some already liked to call me the King of Frost even though my father was very much alive and still in power.

It was clear her element was of fire, and I sensed the strong vibrancy of authority she carried - enough to make our own crew bow, which was clearly a royal trait. She couldn't be an Omega. She had to have others within her command.

*She must have gotten separated from them due to the unexpected wave.*

The slight whimper that escaped her parted lips drew me back into the present as I noticed her struggle to try to wake up. I couldn't help but yearn to

aid her, and when I moved, my brain didn't acknowledge it until the deed was done - my lips pressing lightly against her forehead.

The touch invited a wave of relaxation through me, and it obviously had the same effect on her. She needed to rest and it looked like I'd be the only one to convince her to do exactly that.

*Even with a hint of force.*

**"Sleep,"** I commanded with my Alpha abilities. It might tick her off like any other Alpha trying to control another, but she needed to understand that she was in safe hands and that rest would bring far better results than restraint. ***"No one will hurt you when you're by my side. Absolutely no one."***

My second set of words was what did the trick as her body finally relaxed and she allowed herself to be taken into the world of dreams. I knew I may have to test her after speaking with Alpha Rogue - to secretly unravel whether the sudden pull and sight of her approach wasn't simply an illusion within my consciousness. But for now, I could admire her as she slept.

***"We should speak to Alpha Rogue. He's outside."***

I really didn't want to move, in all honesty, my eyes glued to Alexis, watching the way her chest rose and fell in the perfect rhythm. She was now deep in slumber, and it felt like my movement off the bed wouldn't wake her up either.

*Why is he here so soon?"*

***"You've been sitting here for an hour."*** That was uncalled for, and it made my wolf huff in impatience. ***"Move so we can return sooner. To think I'd be stuck with a love-struck baboon."***

*And you?*

***"I'm a wolf who knows exactly what I want."***

*Yet I'm the love-struck baboon.*

***"Yes, because you're wasting valuable time when you could be having your way with her."***

*We're not savages, and don't you dare try it. You don't touch her unless she gives permission.*

***"Let me guess. Trying not to pull off what Eric did?"***

*That was low and frankly, I don't give a shit about what he did. He's simply one of my Betas.*

***"Ya. You don't care that he fucked that cunt that should have been the woman by your side. Okay."***

*I got off the bed slowly as I attempted to tame the spike of anger that would freeze something in this room if I wasn't careful. The temperature was on the chilly side to begin with. I didn't need to contribute to it.*

*You're the one who still cares about that. I moved on the moment the deed was brought to the surface. He got his humiliation moment and he's only our Beta because of the magic he carries. Nothing more.*

***"Meaning you'll get rid of him soon?"***

*I've told you that we need a replacement. Anyone with more magical strength than him is worthy enough. Grayson is a good choice, but it's clear he has loyalty to another. If he got their permission, we'd get rid of Eric without a problem.*

***"The drama would ignite. We just need to persuade him with a deal he can't refuse. Simple as that."***

*He doesn't portray himself as greedy. We simply have to find something that would encourage him to take the position.*

***"No need to waste our time on it now. Once he brings Grayson to the ship, we can figure things out promptly."***

*Your excitement to get rid of our Beta is like a child grasping the sight of a candy store.*

***"We've shown enough mercy. With the sudden change in these wave dynamics, we need a reliable Expeditioner for these waves and frankly, we have better Betas waiting for us."***

*He had a point. Many assumed my quiet and observant nature was my*

ultimate weakness. I wasn't like my hasty brothers, who would crucify anyone the moment they found out a hint of betrayal.

*I'm no fool, but to be wise in this gambling game of hierarchy, you have to keep your friends close and your enemies closer.*

He thought I knew nothing of what he'd committed behind my back, but I had the upper advantage. Evidence, spies, witnesses to the very deed, and the proper resources to destroy him. If it wasn't for my heightened respect towards Alpha Rogue, he'd be banished and the world of supernaturals would know exactly where I stood with him in the equation.

*Everyone would know of the sin he committed against his Alpha.*

Another look at the sleeping beauty beneath the sheets made my heart beat faster, and I fought hard not to growl at the mere idea of Eric getting close to her.

*Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.*

***"We won't let him taint her."***

His declaration made me smirk because I didn't think she'd allow a man to easily use her. The connection between us may have blossomed something neither of us could define, but I was sure this wasn't the same occurrence for everyone.

*I'd sensed her calling to me, pulled by the flashbacks and sight of a powerful man of flames.*

There was just something that begged for me to pull her into my grasp, my spoken words completely out of my control.

"Queen of Flames," I whispered and reached out to lightly brush my hand against her cheek. "Who are you destined to be to me?"

The question lingered in the air as I decided to depart and confront Alpha Rogue.

All I had to do was open the door to see the massive man leaning against his designated door patiently. His eyes were closed while his bulky arms of muscle were crossed cover his chest. He could be checking in on his wolf or



speaking with his mate.

I internally wished that we'd be able to return to the surface where things would be far easier to discuss. My wolf may enjoy the traditional ways of these lands within the waves, but I enjoyed the present lifestyle above.

When you worked above, there wasn't any need to bullshit around things. You confronted the problem with the evidence you needed, versus treading carefully for the sake of survival. It was far easier to kill within these realms than it was above, and all supernaturals knew that.

*Especially the Dark Senator.*

He waited until I closed the door, adding a locking spell with a buzz of ice magic to ensure no one else entered her domain. I wasn't sure how long our conversation would be, but she'd clearly sleep for a few more hours.

"She's asleep?" He got right to the point.

"Yes. Should be out for a few more hours," I acknowledged. "The other cabin wasn't close to being occupiable. I wouldn't allow her to sleep on the floor either."

"Did she suggest such?" he asked out of curiosity.

"She did," I admitted.

"She's a peculiar one," he admitted but turned around and gestured for me to follow him into his sleeping corridors. That was a signal that we needed a private conversation.

Entering his room, I quietly observed while he did his thing in sealing the space. Royals had many special abilities, and one all of us were trained to enforce was cloaking our spaces during private conversations.

The common saying of the "walls have ears" wasn't a simple fable to ignore, for anyone could play a double position in this world, and it was our role as royals to ensure important information only reached the ears of those who deserved to know.

Unlike my room where I kept the curtains shut, Alpha Rogue's were wide open and delivered the view of the murky, dark waters. We were on calmer

waters now, and once the sun rose up in the sky - *if we were lucky enough to enjoy a sunset in these parts* - we'd depart to the lands and try to pinpoint where we were.

It was one of the reasons I hoped Grayson would be found. He was one of the most sought-after Expeditioners because he was gifted in tracking and locating places within this Void world.

We'd have an advantage thanks to myself and Alpha Rogue's royal statuses, which was why I was rather impatient to have him aboard. He at least knew his worth enough to not accept large sums of money or guaranteed safety.

*Something was holding him back, and I just had to figure out what it was.*

"Eric sure went out of his way to make our rooms rather grand in nature compared to the rest of this crappy ship," Alpha Rogue began as he walked past me to stand before the massive windows.

I decided to follow his lead, landing myself at his left side as we stared at the large body of water we'd crossed before Alexis had unexpectedly crashed into our plans.

"Indeed," I finally replied as my eyes softened and took in the dark sea while sensing the dangerous mysteries hovering within those very waters.

"I should get to the point, shouldn't I?" he suggested mostly to himself.

I side-glanced at him before I sighed. "Upon Grayson's arrival, I'll attempt to personally make another offer to have him join our pack."

There was no need to dance around this topic that we knew was approaching. We knew of the sinful deed committed by Eric long ago, but like a blind man, I walked the path waiting for the right moment when Karma would strike.

*That lovely strike that would humiliate him profoundly.*

"He would be of great use," Alpha Rogue admitted. "But your haste isn't in regards to Grayson, is it?"

When I didn't reply, he chuckled. "I've given you permission to reveal the

truth of my son's forsaken actions and yet you continue to humbly ignore his deeds on my behalf."

Eric Rogue was the son of Richard Rogue, King of Winds. Their wolves were called air benders, though they carried a few extra healing abilities.

Eric was the younger of his two children. His sister, Erika, was the eldest and possible heir of the throne when the time came for Alpha Rogue to step down. If that happened, she'd be one of the few queen rulers, second to the first Kingdom of Queens that had been held strongly by the Inferno Wolf Kingdom.

*Until they had fallen at the hands of the Dark Senator.*

"Eric's greed loves to play the role of a snake, don't you agree?" I suggested while my eyes remained on the swaying waves.

I didn't need to look his way to sense his smile, as he always smiled when he agreed with something that was sadly true.

"We raised him the same way we had Erika and yet he's become tainted by the idea of power," Alpha Rogue admitted. "I've finished my investigation, by the way."

Now that piqued my interest as I turned my head to give him my full attention.

"Your verdict."

"He was involved." Alpha Rogue's voice dropped to a murderous growl as his eyes that were normally filled with joyous glee were nothing short of deadly.

If anyone despised betrayal, it was him. This surely was a rip of an old wound and it only hurt more that it was his own flesh and blood that committed the deed.

"Do you have enough evidence for an arrest?"

"I need a sole witness," he huffed in annoyance because we knew that was asking to find a needle in a haystack.

"Do you believe the rumors that the Inferno Queen is one with pink hair?"

I decided to ask the prime question. It helped ease the way his aura wished to suffocate the culprit of his pain, but the tense air only made me uncomfortable.

"Your guess is as good as mine," he tossed back. "But you already have one in mind."

Out of the five remaining royals, Alpha Rogue was the only one who could read me like my mother could. I never understood how, but I never needed to say many words for him to understand my true intentions, no matter the conversation.

"Alexis didn't land here by accident," I said, getting to the point.

"That was obvious." He laughed. "If I hadn't pulled off that little stormy wind distraction, you would have been caught red-handed."

He had a point there, but I wasn't going to admit my slight fault. I'd been pulled by the distress call of her energy. Before I blinked out of it, she was crashing into me and we were plunging into the sea.

"Queen of Flames," I whispered the word without realizing it, and I noticed the way Alpha Rogue smirked.

"Your mother was right about her speculation of you."

"I doubt it's true." I shut the idea down because I didn't want to deal with it.

*Not yet, anyway.*

"Only time will tell," Alpha Rogue pointed out. "But the bigger question is whether you heard of the reason for the recent raid."

"The declaration that all those with pink hair are now valuable and should be submitted to the Dark Senator bullshit?" I summarized. "Every two weeks it's the same shit."

"Yet, do you believe this will be another wave of 'the same shit'?" he asked.

Again, there was no need to answer because he knew better. He tossed out questions knowing they were already mentally answered based on actions

that had just transpired before our eyes.

"The fallen wolves of flames desire revenge for the bloodshed of their kind. The world will shift, plagued by fire. Instances will wipe out the innocent and the guilty. No one will be safe from the wrath of the cries of the wolves of flames unless the throne is discovered and filled by one who carries the bloodline."

My eyes narrowed at the mystical words, and I closed my eyes briefly as the memory from my mother's tales drifted to my mind.

*"THERE'S A PRINCESS OF FIRE. One who can call to the flames with a snap of her little fingers. Her joyous voice brings warmth in its wake, and her anger can command a kingdom to their knees. She will one be queen of a very powerful kingdom, one that aligns with the various elemental kingdoms, but she's vitally important to our line of royalty."*

*"Why?" I asked with immense curiosity.*

*"For Frost and Inferno are always meant to be together. Complete opposites, and yet they are fated to bring peace to the world. Like Dark and Light, Water and Lightning, Earth and Wind, and the various other kingdoms of opposites, your paths will align."*

*"But why me? What about my brothers?"*

*"They have their own roles to play, Max. Yours will align with this princess one day, but you have to grow big and strong so you can protect her."*

*"I am strong!"*

*"Indeed, you are, but you must continue to be strong, for many people will be after your queen one day."*

*"Why? She's mine."*

*"Ah, yes," Mother admitted and lightly pressed her hands to my cheeks. "But when something is extremely valuable, the world loves to try to take it*

*away. Like a diamond in a field of coal, your queen will be the burning light in a world of darkness and that requires you to be there for her."*

*"How do you know, Mommy?"*

*"Let's just say history is trying to repeat itself. Only this time around, we have to make sure you get a happily ever after. Don't you want to be happy with your queen?"*

*"Yes!" I cheered. "I'll work hard, Mommy! Then I can be with my queen."*

"YOU BELIEVE ALEXIS IS THE ONE?"

"I'm unsure, but at first glance of her power, she is not one to ignore. Her smoke diversion was smart and fooled Alpha Surge and the others, but you sensed her immense power. I'd love to train her up on the surface. More importantly, she needs a pack because it's very obvious she's not a part of one."

"She could make her own pack if she wished to," I admitted.

"I doubt she wishes to do such," Alpha Rogue countered. "If she's who we believe she is, no way would she easily dive into the idea of having a pack of her own. Losing your entire kingdom isn't something you get over."

"No other survivors," I whispered and internally shivered at the thought. I'd lose myself to rage if I lost my family, friends, and pack. I might not have been the current King, but the loyalty and bonds I'd created within the pack that helped raise me were irreplaceable. To witness that all slip away from my grasp and be forced to live on with the constant reminder would drive me mad.

"Like I said, time will tell, but I suggest you tackle whatever is thrumming between you two by morning. Once Eric returns and you offer Grayson the potential position, I can guarantee not everyone will be on board with our decision."

"Where do you stand?" I inquired. All I needed was his decision of which

side he was on. This involved his son after all, so if he wished to depart, I wouldn't judge him in the slightest.

"My alliance with the Atlas pack still stands," he announced. "I've already finalized the papers with my queen."

"And if Eric is against it?" I decided to bring up the obvious.

"Eric's opinion is rather useless in this gamble, wouldn't you say?" he offered, but continued, "Erika has agreed to step in as heir early if necessary."

I arched an eyebrow in his direction. "You're okay with her stepping in? She's only twenty-five."

"Twenty is the common age of rulership. Anything more is blessed time. I've trained her well and she continues to train herself in the arts. She may respect Eric, but it will come to a dramatic end if I reveal the true extent of his actions."

"What will happen then?"

"Eric can either leave the pack or face the consequences the old-fashioned way. If he takes that route, he'll continue to be my son. I do not fear the humiliation that will come to my name, for wolves aren't stupid. Everyone has a mind of their own, and his actions won't completely taint our name. However, if he won't admit to his actions, I'll gladly announce his revoked status and cast him out from the pack myself."

"He's your only son, Richard." I used his first name to emphasize what a big deal this was, but it only made a wide grin form on his aged face as he slowly turned his gaze onto me.

"I have many sons, Maximus," he whispered. "I was one of the first to bless you at birth. I watched you be raised by your older brothers, pack, and parents. I've contributed to your growth and worked alongside you as we traveled various planes in the void of clockwork to discover the truth and treasures of these lands, and now here we stand as we confront my son's actions that led to your decision to carry a broken heart."

He looked away as his face hardened, all those emotions of pride and

remorse seeping away as anger etched into his face and his eyes darkened entirely.

"One thing I'll never stand for is betrayal. To go against my livelihood is to go against my pack's values that I've instilled from day one. Those consequences have always led to death. He's simply lucky to have his life and nothing else stolen from his grasp other than common hierarchy. If he won't admit to his mistakes, he's nothing but a true traitor, and I will never allow someone like that to remain in my pack domain. No matter if they're of blood."

"I understand, Alpha Rogue," I whispered.

"I keep telling you to call me Richard and you hardly ever," he noted but reached out to pat my shoulder. "My best advice is to follow your calling, son. Your past and suffering may have been shattered by envious seduction, but maybe that was what you needed to know exactly what you want in this new world."

"What if I'm no longer the man I was years ago?"

"No one is who they were ten years ago, Maximus. Bad things happen to us to either force us to crumble or to push us to rise towards what we want. You've worked towards your destiny. Don't allow fear to shatter what is already yours."

"She's not mine, Richard," I voiced with a slight smirk.

"Not yet," he admitted. "But let's see what occurs after you seek the depths of her unconsciousness."

"Isn't that invasive?"

"It is, but I don't think you'll have a choice. You'll understand once you decide to get some rest."

"I'm not sleeping tonight."

"If you say so." He was laughing again. "I'll take a power nap, for I'll surely need it."

"I have one more inquiry, Richard," I quietly confessed.



"Yes?" He looked at me with interest as I stared into the hollows of the sea.

"Do you think we can play this game of chess at the expense of having a Rejected King?"

His hand squeezed my shoulder further as he quietly whispered, "I'm uncertain. But rejection is simply that. What's someone's trash is another person's treasure. Be yourself, Maximus. Allow the man you've grown into be in charge like you always have. Love isn't forced, it's earned, and I know that the love our Goddess of the Moon has created for you will blossom into something far greater than you can imagine."

His wise words made me smile fully as I closed my eyes and let out a long exhale.

"I appreciate your words, Alpha Rogue."

"And I appreciate the company of someone who has enough common sense. I swear Alpha Surge is going to get an aneurysm if he doesn't let go of his anger issues," he concluded with a drastic sigh.

I couldn't help but chuckle as I shook my head. "You know he may go with Eric."

"And if he does, he'll be an even bigger fool than I gave him credit for" he concluded. "If so, good riddance. Now, go watch your Fallen Beauty."

"Your...hmpf," I replied and headed to the door. "Goodnight, Alpha Rogue."

"Allow yourself to let go, Maximus," he reminded. "Our Goddess will never forsake you."

*I just have to let go and pray I'm not forsaken by destiny...again.*

## ALPHA OF FROST AND TEST WITHIN HER DREAMS OF SORROW: PART TWO

~ALEXANDRA~

*"I reject you."*

Those words echoed all around me, like a sinful hymn within the captive stainless glass walls of a cathedral. I stared into those eyes of evergreen, watching the way his lips curled in pleasure at my obvious devastation.

Unlike the past, in this moment of desolation, it truly felt like my heart was cracking into a million pieces, the agony crippling me to my knees as I hung my head in shame.

Flames burst out of the walls and the floors, and suddenly I was running for dear life. I had to run harder. Move faster. Race against the clock that fought against me. Prove my worthiness by successfully surviving this tantrum of unfortunate events.

*No.*

I came to a dramatic stop as my uneven breaths made my shoulders lift up and down. Sweat cloaked my clammy skin as my eyes frantically looked for a way out, only there was no way in or out. All there was, was darkness, flames, smoke, and waves of pain.

*"Why don't you escape?"* A voiced questioned my movements, the

sound as calm as ever in comparison to this world that was crumbling into ash.

I violently shook my head at the mere thought as tears blurred my vision. I swiftly wiped them away as I bit my lip hard.

"I won't cower away. I'm no longer weak!" I screamed as if the loud affirmation would aid me in my task. No matter the reality that I didn't know which way led to those I loved, I pushed myself to run the way I came, the flames becoming thicker and wilder in motion as I sought to find the way to those I cherished.

***"You're going the wrong way."***

"I will not leave those I love behind!" I screamed to the mysterious voice of tranquility. The being above didn't understand my desperation. The pain destroyed me as I was left in shambles at the cost of my kingdom.

I'd craved to live, to breathe another day, but at what cost? In the end, my family had perished, my people had fallen into the plague of the shadows, and my kingdom was surely forgotten.

No one knew of the amazing traits we carried as a solid pack. None were aware of the talents of singing, dancing, and swordplay that were woven into our heritage. The key sources of our flames and array of abilities were a mystery to the world, and no one cared.

*Not a single person fought to discover what had occurred that fateful day, or the culprits of my kingdom's slaughter. All was left astray, and the world accepted the words of those who plotted our demise with the simple agreement that there were no survivors.*

The memories came back to me, rushing like tsunami waves. Each emotional crash felt like it brushed my body, forcing me to slow down as I tried to recover from each whiplash of pain.

All the memories of the past, the prideful smiles from my mother and father, the happy laughter of my younger brother, the various individuals from professors of knowledge to physical trainers of swordsmanship and

magic, so many individuals contributed to my upbringing - my uprising - and because of my blind judgment the burst of love had led to their tragic finale.

*Now I was wanted? For what? My throne that no one cared about until deemed important by a Seer? My seat of power had held the balance of the world for centuries. They allowed it to be ruined and for what reward?*

***Absolutely nothing.***

I came to a stop as the knowledge of the past molded with experiences of my present, leaving me frozen in emotions that fought to destroy me. The flames closed in as did the darkness, my tears rolling aimlessly down my flushed cheeks as I lifted my shaking hands and pressed them against my ears.

I muffled as much of the sounds as I could, the crackling of the flames lessening along with the haunting cheers and words of celebration that drifted further away.

All I wanted was complete silence - a moment just to think about what needed to be done to survive this challenge.

***"Why do you carry such guilt for something out of your control?"***

The question made me whimper as I lowered my hands and noticed the entire place was suddenly filled with darkness. No more flames or taunting sounds. Just quietness.

I closed my eyes and allowed myself to tremble, fighting to answer this godly being's question.

"I ran away," I whispered in shame. "He rejected me...the one who should have been my saving grace."

More tears fled my eyes as if I were mourning that very day all over again. I'd never really given myself the opportunity to do exactly that. With the loss of everything I'd looked forward to combined with the first wave the world had experienced, everything was pushed to a corner in the depths of

my mind and I'd never allowed myself to confront it.

Was this the moment I needed to face my immense regret?

For a moment, I didn't feel alone as a soft touch pressed against my wet cheeks. I wanted to see who it was, discover the mystery behind this deep, tranquil voice that was one of the first to truly ask me about the guilt I'd carried upon my tense shoulders for years.

Even in this individual's presence, I couldn't fathom lifting my head to see their appearance with my own two eyes. I was ashamed of the past mistakes - the old me that was filled with so much fear and uncertainty, that I was led astray by priorities that meant nothing.

"As a queen, I should have risen to the challenge, even if it meant death. I...should have cut through the pain rejection delivered and worked hard towards saving my loved ones. It was my duty. I was sworn in to do exactly that, but because of heartache...because of that man...I failed! It was the happiest day of my life. The day where everything went right...meeting my mate should have been the icing on the cake, not the destroyer of it and everything I'd worked hard towards since the day of my birth."

If I could hang my head lower, I would have, as my trembling hands lost feeling along with my arms as they fell to my sides in hopelessness.

"The guilt I carry is mine to bear. That's the least I can do..."

***"Then what about vengeance? Is that not worth pursuing?"***

"What is vengeance in a land that cares about nothing other than power and status? A world where death is but a game and you're left to cut off the pawns that seek to be the first line of defense towards the true culprit of this uneventful game? The man who rejected me was just another pawn who somehow decided my suffering would be to live. To spare me a moment's grace to run as far as I could. My survival only confirms that I lost the battle."

***"Why is that? You haven't lost the game."***

"I'm the last chess piece left. I'm the queen on the board but I have no path to domination."

***"Yet you're the key piece that can change this entire thing around. You may have been forced to be the gambit of this round, but what if your reinforcements have arrived?"***

"Reinforcements," I repeated the single word as my eyes suddenly grew heavy.

***"What if a king arrived with his pawns, rooks, and knights? What if, at that final moment where the enemy assumed you'd be down for the taking, an army arrived to lift the burden off your heavy shoulders? Would it allow you to take a break from carrying such weight? Would you give him a chance to take the load off you?"***

"At what cost?" I couldn't help but question the possibility that glittered in gold. If I allowed myself to be tempted by such a wonderful offer, I'd become prey to fool's gold and be left in shambles once more.

***"At the simple cost of loyalty."***

I was afraid to lift my head, or maybe I was simply too tired to do the deed as my eyes closed. The weight of what was being given to me versus what I'd have to give in return was far too uneven, but a part of me felt like it was made for me to accept. Made to be far too tempting to refuse.

One thing I could guarantee when anyone worked with me was my loyalty. If my trust was never broken, I'd give them my services without a second guess. This being had become my aid in this world of uncertainty, and now I surely owed him in return.

"Loyalty," I whispered.

***"Nothing but loyalty,"*** he confirmed.

I could agree to that. The idea allowed me to relax until it felt like I was resting in this person's broad arms.

"Then...I accept," I quietly agreed, hoping I'd made the right choice.

*And then my consciousness drifted into reality.*



MY EYES SNAPPED OPEN, and I fought for breath, forcing myself to sit up and simply inhale as much air as my lungs would allow. Sweat dripped down my face and the rest of my bare body, and I noticed the glimmering glimpse of sunlight that began to seep into the room from the slightly opened curtains.

My body buzzed with energy, foreign in nature, and yet left me feeling like I could run across the water if I allowed myself to do so. Quickly running my hands through my short locks, I worked on calming my rapid breathing while my eyes slowly scanned around until they locked onto the other person in the room.

My eyes paused on the man sitting further left in the room. It took my brain a moment to play catch-up as memories of my sudden confrontation flooded my consciousness while my body began to tingle with a different sort of energy.

That was all it took for me to be lost in those orbs that drew me right in, their captivating hold only encouraging me to close the distance between us. I wondered if he felt the same way as his eyes bored into mine and the air around us sizzled with intensity.

It got stronger and stronger until it felt like I couldn't breathe unless my very lips took the air from this man's lungs and I enjoyed the touch of his hands across my flesh. For the first time, I waited for Maeve to jump in - to remind me that we'd just met this man mere hours ago and no way could we "throw ourselves" at him.

He had to have a mate of his own, a girlfriend...or even a boyfriend. I had Grayson after all, and yet the reminder of him only emphasized that we'd promised to always be friends with benefits.

How convenient that rule was in this feverish moment of lust because I questioned whether I was going to allow myself to go through this. It would have been logical to not submit, right? To find every excuse about how I was obviously mistaking my feelings for these palpable feelings of tension and desire.

*Anything else than what I was formulating in my mind.*

When he rose up out of his seat suddenly, all I could do was remain completely still. Would it suddenly make me invisible? Probably not, especially with the rays of glowing orange pouring onto my naked flesh.

The timing was perfect, with the slight twinkling of the ocean surface dancing into the room, for this beast of a man took every single moment to take me in - his eyes scanning me from my head down to toes.

I grasped the fact that I'd thrown the blanket completely off of me during my panic, which was pretty foolish of me, but the heat was far too excruciating to endure in my heated thrall. I wasn't embarrassed in the slightest with my nakedness - no, I was enjoying the way my body was working its magic on this stranger.

The man who'd pulled me into the wave. The one with snowflake eyes, stunning white strands that surpassed his lower back, and a muscular structure. He had pale flesh with various tattoos that wrapped gracefully around his chiseled chest and biceps.

His sharp jawline, pointed nose, slight stubble, and the sexy roughness of his lips that would leave more than just bruises hit all the checkmarks in my box of attractiveness, but there was so much more to him than just his appearance.

It was the way his emotions flickered in his snowy spheres. How they admired me in a number of ways, the first inspection checking if I had any wounds against my flesh, before the second round to truly admire every line and curve.

The third round was him taking his sweet time admiring what he liked, his eyes lingering on my eyes, lips, breasts, and hips. I was sure if he could get a glimpse of my ass, that could have been an added bonus.

Finally, he met my eyes once more and that was what seemed to click something between us: a dangerous hunger that sought to be tamed, and nothing else would be able to control it but each other.



I tried to mentally think this through, to use logic to my advantage like I'd done to survive this long with the aid of Edwin and Raf. Surely, he'd scold me for randomly fucking a stranger, but this man meant more to me.

*He had to mean more to me.*

If I didn't move, I knew he would try to come closer to the side of the bed, so I took control of this ongoing show, moving slowly so he could track my every move while my eyes never left his. Before we knew it, I was in front of him and it was my turn to admire every line of chiseled flesh, each inked swirl, and how mesmerizing those orbs of his were up close.

My eyes lowered to his lips and I almost forgot to breathe, but I finally felt Eve in my subconscious. She didn't have anything to say as she began to seep through my body, her energy growing stronger as she inched closer to the surface.

I wondered if this man - Alpha Maximus - was doing the same, because those blue orbs grew lighter until they were a sheer white, almost transparent. I caught onto the slight twinkles of gold, which meant his wolf was close to taking control, but it was becoming clear as we stood there facing one another that neither of our wolves was coming out to play.

*It felt as if they were trying to grant each other permission.*

The intense silence was surely deafening as my blood pumped loud enough to make my ears ring. My cheeks flushed hotter the longer we remained in place, and I was having a hard time not panting in desire as my arousal grew from simply standing there.

I took the dangerous chance of lowering my gaze for a brief second, and I could see the bulge in his pants without struggle. It pressed against his black boxers, practically begging to be freed from its hostage position within the fabric.

His frame alone made my imagination go wild with the idea of how big his length was, leaving me to slowly swipe my tongue along my bottom lip. He watched the move entirely, as Eve and his wolf seemed to back down.

*Maeve?*

She was silent for a long moment, and I anxiously waited for her to say something - *anything that could explain what the hell was going on between us and this stranger of an Alpha* - but her reply wouldn't just give me some sort of answer.

*It would ignite a storm of pleasure I wasn't prepared for.*

**"Mate."**

Her words didn't just echo against the walls of my shocked mind, they escaped my lips, drifting through the charged air and reaching my ears just as the deep voice of Alpha Maximus spoke the same word.

"Mate."

My eyes further widened as the single word began to blossom emotions within me that weren't mine. My level of astonishment was equal to his as I struggled to swallow the lump in my throat while emotions I thought were buried forever bubbled to the surface.

"That's not...possible." My lips trembled as I sought some sort of explanation. "I...I can't...I..." The words trailed off as my brain filled with piles of negative thoughts.

*No way am I deserving of this. Deserving...of such a man. I was rejected. A rejected queen at that. Why would I be blessed with another partner? Given someone...who...meets everything I could desire in a man. No...this couldn't be true. It was an illusion. A joke. An enemy ploy to disarm me entirely.*

I wanted to run away, the desire pushing every nerve in my body to leave the safety of this room and risk surviving the realms of this wave until another took me back to NYC where I knew my way to find answers, but then I halted the thoughts of escaping this new challenge - fighting against the onslaught of fear that reminded me of the past.

When he moved one step closer, I quivered at his closeness as those feelings swarmed me, only I couldn't allow myself to absorb the various

feelings, for I feared what approached as he placed his hands lightly on my cheeks, stilling my head from moving even the slightest.

"What's your name, Alexis?" he whispered, and my eyes filled with tears as my heart was already on a sinking course to oblivion. His eyes further widened as if feeling my internal despair, and he couldn't help but whisper, "What frightens you, Queen of Flames?"

Was it worth telling him? Did I even have a choice? He'd reject me like the last mate had, and no way could I survive another shattered heart. It took five years to mold the confidence I displayed on the outside, but here in these enclosed walls was where it all came down.

*Where I now was bare of armor, completely vulnerable while I faced yet another challenge that would surely ruin me entirely.*

"Don't..." I struggled to let the pleading words out as my tears finally fell down my cheeks. "Don't shatter me like he did.... Don't...reject me out of amusement. Don't...don't I deserve a break? Haven't I proven myself worthy enough for one?"

His shock flooded me, but what I hadn't expected was the tender touch of his lips upon my trembling mouth. I whimpered into his kiss because I didn't think this was real.

Then his emotions rushed into me like the flood gates had been opened. I felt his immense need to comfort me. The deep kiss was like a heightened drug, triggering endorphins that rushed to my aid in an attempt to vanquish the solitude and allow me to be happy.

He didn't do it to try and sway me with lust, but with a level of reassurance I'd never fully experienced with another. He gripped my cheeks firmly while his body remained close with no signs of wishing to depart from my presence in a heartbeat.

The break of the kiss only allowed us to breathe as our lips brushed and more tears ran down my cheeks. I couldn't understand why my muddled mind was just as confused while my eyes took his wonderous spheres in.

"Maximus Atlas," he breathed quietly into the air. "Alpha Maximus Atlas. Fourth son of King Atlas and future heir of the Kingdom of Frost."

His introduction was different from what I'd endured five years ago. I hadn't even gotten the man's name before he rejected me and attempted to walk away from me before I'd collapsed. My legs wobbled and my knees begged to cave in, and it took everything I had to remain standing as I swallowed another lump in my throat.

This was a moment I needed to do alone, even though I wished for Maeve's assistance. She knew this was an obstacle I had to overcome if I wished to get stronger, and maybe that was why she kept far away, to give me this moment of privacy before I tackled the storm head-on.

Moon Goddess had unexpectedly delivered me a new opportunity - *a bright horizon* - and this was my chance to either accept it with a speck of hope or shatter it due to my broken past.

"Ale...Ale..." I struggled to reveal my identity, and I feared I'd already screwed up my chance because of how weak I probably appeared to him, but his thumbs brushed my tears away. The movement forced me to meet his gaze once more.

"I don't know what hurt you, Alexis," he whispered, "but take a moment just to feel."

He took his time inching closer until our lips simply brushed, but I let my eyes close as a cool wave flowed through my scorching body, giving me a single moment to feel exactly what he wished me to feel.

The world around us seemed to fade away as my head began to pound like a knocking door, but I didn't flinch away from the pain this time. I allowed it as the swirling force of an emotional symphony played into the atmosphere around us and allowed me to finally feel what was there all along.

*Happiness. Pride. Lust. Resentment. Worry. Fear. Curiosity. A speck of sadness. Uncertainty. Confusion. Wonder. Hope. Love. Immense Passion.*

*Desire and hunger. Protectiveness...Fulfillment.*

So many various emotions and yet nothing was too intense to make me believe he'd discard me the next minute. As much as I mentally wished to push him away and give myself a moment to think logically, my body would be my saving grace because my lips pressed back against his - giving him permission to further deepen the phenomenal kiss.

Those hands slipped from my cheeks to move slowly down my neck to my shoulders, and very cautiously, he allowed his fingers to trail down my back until his arms hooked around my waist to keep me right against him.

The bittersweet kiss ended on its own, and with gathered confidence, I allowed myself to answer him truthfully - *knowing he wouldn't betray me.*

"Alexandra Wolf. Queen...Alexandra Wolf."

I expected him to be surprised, and there was the chance he'd bind me and give me to the Senator himself, but instead, he pressed me closer against him while our foreheads met in the middle.

***"Alexandra."*** He said it like he was out of breath. ***"Sweet mate of mine."***

The tension in my body faded away as his Alpha-cloaked words brought an overflowing wave of relief - enough for my knees to buckle. I didn't fall, since my body was scooped up in a graceful movement before my mouth was consumed by his once more.

The move landed me back on the ruffled sheets of the bed, my frame tiny in comparison to his massive figure that hovered above me. I couldn't admire him as I would have normally because my body was running on autopilot as the prickling need to be one overrode any other logical thought that could have graced my consciousness.

We kissed like the world was in our grasp, like time wasn't making the sun move higher up on the horizon. But the time limit I'd set for myself was counting down to its final moments.

I couldn't care less about anything but him. The way his aroma of pine

and roasted chestnuts wrapped around me in a chilled embrace, and his sculpted body that was as cold as ice.

His temperature was opposite of mine, my body burning up like a fireplace while I finally allowed myself to internally rejoice. It was like having an extremely delayed reaction time, but that trigger was finally blossoming in my heart that beat fast and hard against my chest, while my body was occupied with this beast of a man who didn't care about taking the lead.

Our kisses moved from passionate to rough, the spike of hunger growing and growing as the desire to fuck each other was inching us closer and closer to the deed. He growled against my lips when I tried to wiggle out of his hold, his impatience clearly not in my favor as he worked on pinning my wrists against the sheets and kissing me effortlessly.

I was a panting mess when he released my swollen lips, but that was only the beginning of the torture his mouth caused for me. He moved along my neck, leaving bites and hickeys with every deep kiss and licking the sensitive flesh as a bonus.

He dragged his tongue down to my hard nipples, enjoying the way I whimpered and fought against his hold as he teased each breast by sucking, flicking, and lightly biting on the sensitive buds that left my pussy fluttering with arousal.

All the times I'd wished for a man to pin me down and enjoy every bit of me was suddenly coming to pass, and it was far better than I'd ever considered was possible because Maximus clearly enjoyed being in control.

"Why couldn't you be mine from the get-go?" His question was muffled against my flesh as he took his time kissing my flat stomach, licking the lines of my abs before placing a kiss in each section.

I wondered what he meant, but it didn't seem to matter as he was now working on my thighs and spreading my legs apart to take a deep inhale.

"Fuck," he cursed and smiled devilishly as his hooded eyes met my wide

ones. "You smell utterly delightful, Alexandra."

I shivered at the soft growl of my full name, and I couldn't fight the wave of heat that assaulted my cheeks as I wondered if he could fulfill my request. It had to have filtered to him in some way because he paused right between my legs to lift his gaze to me once more.

"What are you thinking?"

"I...like being called Alexandra during sex instead of Alexis." It sounded rather stupid to me all of sudden, but I swallowed down the urge to look away as I continued to stare into his darkened eyes. "No one has been able to do that...so..."

He said nothing, but suddenly his ice-cold tongue moved along my glistening folds to the bud of clit and all he needed was five solid seconds until I was cumming hard like I'd never climaxed in my life.

My shock was evident in my gawking mouth as I breathed rapidly from the sudden wave of ecstasy. My response was golden to Alpha Maximus because he smiled wickedly.

"Alright, Alexandra. Let's see if we can test that theory."

I never would have imagined someone being able to change the temperature of their tongue to freezing cold, but Alpha Maximus was proving that he could do that and a whole lot of other things to make me quiver, my pleasure at his ultimate disposal.

When he deemed me ready for his massive cock, I could barely think straight as the sunrise poured into the room. I wondered if this room was even soundproof, but maybe it didn't matter because we were wolf shifters, and our kind didn't care too much about privacy in the realms of sex.

Giving me this moment to breathe, he moved off the bed to slip his boxers off, giving me the full view of his length. To say he was big would be an insult. Huge didn't seem to cut it either. The best way to describe it was that I wondered if Goddess of the Moon thought this partnership was the ultimate joke, that this man's cock wouldn't shred my uterus apart because

that was exactly what it could do with such a massive thickness and length.

When he was back on the bed and between my legs, I braced for the hurricane about to begin between us. He took a moment to admire me, but I didn't expect him to suddenly lean over to kiss me tenderly.

The kiss was shorter than the others but enough to calm me further as he whispered against my lips, "I don't know what stroke of luck I walked upon to experience this moment with you, but I vow under the remaining power of the moon and the twinkling rays of the sun that this bond will never dare make you feel unloved."

His words of tenderness pulled at my emotional chords, and I nodded slightly in approval as he leaned back once more and readied himself at my entrance. There were no more delays as he began to inch into me, and boy, did we draw out the sensational sound of our moans as our eyes rolled back to enjoy the pulsing fullness his cock delivered in my tight, pulsing pussy.

"Good girl," he praised as we struggled to calm our breaths. "Took me all in."

He hadn't moved and I felt like I could cum at this very moment. He must have sensed it because his grin was priceless with a hint of mockery that made me want to bite his head off, but the idea had him chuckling - the sound so new to my ears, it took my entire concentration to listen to the fine notes of jubilee and store it in my mental storage to play on repeat.

*Okay, that totally had to be a mate thing or something.*

He pulled out slowly, and I moaned and gripped the sheets beneath me as I bit my lip to fight against my closeness.

*Then he rammed into me with one thrust.*

I caved immediately as my moaning cry bounced against the walls. He waited for me to calm from my high before he began to really fuck me, the thrusting movement taking me on a rollercoaster ride that left me mindless as I moaned his name.

"Alpha Maximus," I hissed as he pounded into me. My breasts lifted up



and down, as his movements were fierce, all while he slapped my ass cheeks before leaning down to suck the nape of my neck and ensure nothing was seen but his marks of claimed authority.

*To him, I was his property now.*

"Do you want this, Alexandra?" Alpha Maximus breathed. "Are you enjoying my cock that's fucking you senseless?"

"Yes," I breathed as he picked up the pace, the two of us panting even harder while our eyes were locked on one another. We were lost in our world, this new world where I realized that, from this day forward, I wasn't alone.

I'd never necessarily been alone, but for once in my life, I could feel the safety net within myself. Feel that I had someone to lean on in this world that hadn't been kind to me within the last five years.

I was about to cum together with an Alpha, who unexpectedly was now my mate and surprisingly accepted me. I couldn't filter through the emotions such thoughts invoked, but right now, it wasn't the time because I was so fucking close.

"Faster! Harder!"

"Faster? How about now?"

"More. Please, more!"

"Does my cock drive you insane?"

"Yes!"

"Do you want to cum, Alexandra?"

"Please, yes!" I was practically begging because I was so fucking close. My moans were out of control as my body grew rigid - my pussy contracting around his thick length while he grunted and began to grow tense with his approaching climax on the horizon.

We both braced for the inevitable end, and I felt as if we were trying to fight against it. Our resistance seemed to invite our wolves into the picture because Maeve was back and slamming right through me as I watched Maximus's eyes glow with power - seconds before his lips pressed into my

chest, right between my sternum, while my fingers reached out to grip his back, my nails digging into his flesh as I grunted out a moan that went up a damn octave.

"Fuck! Cum, Alexandra!" The order pushed me to the edge and I screamed in ecstasy, waves of pleasure consuming me. Heat flooded my fingers as my palms that always were cold suddenly grew as hot as the flames I commanded.

Maximus hissed in pain, but I was no different as shots of ice-cold energy flickered against my chest and spread across my skin while our orgasms still soared through our joined bodies.

We were left in a choked silence as pain and pleasure molded together and surfed the highs of our combined forces.

I couldn't stop the flow of magic until my eyes rolled back and I collapsed against the bed, pulling Alpha Maximus with me as we remained absolutely still while the burning sensation continued to lay its mark upon our flesh.

My mind would have to catch up to what was going on with my body, but as of now, I needed a moment of serenity in the depths of the darkness, and that was exactly what my body delivered as I fell into the pleasurable arms of the black oasis.

*Whatever test I'd endured...all I could hope for was that I'd passed with flying colors.*

## FROSTED CHAOS AND REJECTED REUNION

~MAEVE~

MY AWAKENING WAS SUBMERGED with remnants of pleasure and stinging pain, the combination reminding me of a past I was so desperate to forget. I hesitated to open my eyes, to acknowledge the truth of these sudden circumstances and the familiar eyes that would meet mine the moment I peered upward.

*This can't be real.*

Since the birth of Alexandra, I'd remained hidden in the shadows. The elders of our royal family were desperate to keep me as a sinful secret that had been summoned and "blessed" within the womb in the queen's first child.

They all expected me to return as a male, to be reborn and sit upon the throne I'd protected until the fateful end, but alas, things changed at the hands of our Goddess, for I came back as the same gender as the child she'd destined to rule.

*And I became the second soul, the one who morphed into her wolf.*

She knew nothing of the deeds done to bring life and power into her grasp, and who knew if it would remain a secret forever, seeing as I didn't have enough courage to tell her myself.

*How do you tell the host of your power that they were never supposed to exist, that it was an error of judgment by the elders who wished to reincarnate my lost soul?*

I wasn't sure if it even mattered anymore, as here I was with a few brief moments of control to acknowledge the truth. To see whether the same had been done to my counterpart that I'd lost that day for the sake of our generations to come.

*My Queen of Flames from the past, who seemed to have switched roles along with genders.*

Opening my eyes, I fought to catch my breath while my body still shook with aftershocks. The pain still trickled through me, but I knew what they had unexpectedly done.

A grunt came from my left side before he slowly rose up to hover over me with his large hands pressed against the wrinkled sheets. He was still catching his breath like I was, but as I watched him open his eyes and lock onto mine, my breath hitched and I got lost in those orbs of vibrant color.

The heightened blue and white, with shades of purple, green, and gold, it was like looking into an orb filled with the Northern Lights, but these spheres of serenity held a deeper meaning behind their mesmerizing glory.

These were the eyes of my love from the past, but instead of burning fire that charged their twinkling essence, they moved in waving harmony while they grew glassy. My own vision blurred as I struggled with the rising emotions that fought to choke me up.

*I'd been Yin, desperate to find my Yang, and here he was, hidden within the depths of a king who finally found his queen.*

All the sorrow Alexandra had gone through, the pain of losing her nation, home, family, friends, teachers, wise ones, and destined mate rose up in me. It was as if her destiny had truly shattered with the crown she'd just received, leaving us in rejected sorrow while wondering if we'd ever be able to pick up the pieces of broken glass and put them back together.

The task was deemed impossible, and though we hadn't lost everyone that day, it didn't dismiss the reality that our hidden kingdom of peace had been raided by one who wished for nothing but our downfall.

The bitterness I'd carried throughout our recovering from our past, while aiming to give Alexandra the support she needed to become who we were now had been consuming. It was finally here - a dream I thought could never come true - yet I didn't know how to react.

*And neither did he.*

We stared for what surely was longer than a minute, but I knew I didn't have long.

"She doesn't know I can take complete control." I breathed the forbidden truth, which rewarded me with an arched eyebrow of question. "They never told her what she should have been. Who she should have become. The night of the crowning should have delivered the news of her past...our entwined past, but...it never happened."

He knew why. There was no need to explain the obvious, but I waited nervously for his response - shocked by the way those lips lifted at the corners while he leaned down to kiss me tenderly. I didn't know how to react to the soft touch.

He pulled back enough for our eyes to remain in contact as he whispered, "Maximus knows not of my ability to take complete control. It's one we're working towards, but he indeed knows bits of who we're destined to be. Who he's reincarnated from...though the gender switch is intriguing, King of Frost," he teased.

My cheeks burned for the first time ever as I experienced a sense of shyness at his teasing statement.

"I've always wanted to know what it was like to be so confident in my element like you," he admitted and lightly ran his tongue along my bottom lip before he tugged it gently with his teeth. "Wondered how you did everything so boldly without a hint of fear. Even to the very end."

*The ending of our lives where we sacrificed all we had to protect our packs.*

"Being a male really empowers one's drive," he confessed while admiring my face. "Yet, your femininity is what brought you back to me."

"Why now?" I had to ask the inevitable. "What...happens now?"

His smile only furthered to light his facial features and I shivered when he moved enough for me to acknowledge his cock was still deep within me.

"We continue to play this game," he answered like it wasn't rocket science. "Discover why our paths have crossed. There has to be a reason, one only Moon Goddess knows of. It's our duty to watch over our counterparts and aid in gathering the armies we once had at our disposal."

"A pack," I hummed. "We...don't have one."

"That's not a concern," he assured me as his lips brushed mine once more. "We have each other now. That's all we ever needed, remember?"

His statement actually made me smile in return as I blinked my eyes to stop my tears from overflowing. "My time is running out," I warned, feeling the creeping sensation of Alexandra's consciousness. "Maeve...or Eve for short."

"Adamson," he revealed. "Adam for short."

"That's just a horrendous combination." I voiced my obvious displeasure, which made him chuckle before he slid his length enough for just his tip to remain within my heated pussy.

"I agree, Eve," he lightly growled. "But that only means you've always been meant for me."

He thrust swiftly, leaving me to gasp. "Ada-" He cut me off with his lips as he began to move. I remembered the last night we'd shared together, only I was in complete control, my body of chiseled mass cloaked in sweat from hours of fucking.

I wanted her to know how much I appreciated every bit of her. To bring her nothing but pleasure, all night long, and leave us in a world of

blissfulness until morning arrived.

How similar this experience was - the thrumming force of deja vu ringing through my body as the sun's rays shone brightly into our room, just like our final morning where we took advantage of the peaceful quietness of the world to ride the final ride of exotic jubilee.

I gripped his shoulders while he fucked me hard and fast, and I wondered if Maximus was as close to returning as Alexandra was. These circumstances that should have been against us were only working in our favor, and in time, the world would feel our wrath as we revealed the enemy who silenced us with death.

"Ah," I moaned uncontrollably as I held him tighter, and he only moved faster with my moans as encouragement. He grunted as I felt his closeness, and I was sure he could sense how close I was to cumming.

The bond was solidifying, our emotions meshing together as one. I wished we could stay together longer, but I mentally vowed for more times like this. For us to have more ten-minute moments to be with one another.

I could only imagine what it would be like to be in our wolf forms again. To run through the valleys and up the hills with the intention of rolling down them together. Out of the chaos of darkness, and after years of patience, our uprising was approaching with this unexpected turn of events.

The Goddess of the Moon had our backs, and it was time for the world to acknowledge that.

"Adam!" I croaked the sound because my throat was dry while my body arched in preparation for the rush of pleasure that was about to slam into my senses.

He groaned and sped up further before he let out a final grunt and smashed his lips against mine to muffle my scream as he sank his cock as deep as he could.

"Eve!"

Our climax moans were muffled in each other's mouths as our bodies

burst with pleasure. It felt so good, emotions clinging desperately to my core. I missed this sensation - this feeling of oneness and how calm I felt whenever my mate was in my arms.

Now in this new world, his embrace delivered me the safety I once brought her in the past, while I felt my presence gave comfort and relaxation to him in return. We aided one another, and this was only the beginning. Maximus would have to guide Alexandra to discover what her true destiny had been in the past and present before it was shattered by our Creator's hands.

As I lay here panting through more aftershocks, I suddenly felt thankful that the original plan of placing my soul in the chambers of the unborn child had backfired. That our wise one who hid secrets darker than these times of turmoil made the same mistake as the Atlas family.

I didn't need to carry this burden on my own. I was just one half of a whole, and now I'd found my partner in justice. In this world of the present, he was now my rock. Though I wasn't sure if our rejected title would bring a negative weight, I was sure we'd figure it out.

*Nothing would steal my love from me again...not even death.*



**~ALEXANDRA~**

WHEN I CAME BACK to consciousness, I was snuggled in Maximus's hold. We were in an odd position, or maybe it was odd for him since he was lying on his stomach, but had me snuggled against his side with his large arm over my waist like I was his precious teddy bear.

I waited for a wave of anxiety to try to cripple me, or for my mind to go on a hunt collecting all the wrongs of this situation, but instead, I was greeted



with simplistic clarity.

*We'd fucked...but what happened after?*

I was tempted to look down to my chest, but I wouldn't deny that I wasn't sure if I was ready to acknowledge what it potentially could be. My mind knew better, or at least I recalled the various books I'd read over the years about certain wolf shifter kinds and their ability to bond.

There was of course fated bonds, the mated connection created by our Moon Goddess, but there was also a second one. A method of bonding that was raw, emotional, vulnerable in nature, and left a brand of ownership upon the shifter's flesh.

Normally, the male shifter had to claim the female, and it took years for the male to prove his loyalty to the female for her to brand him.

*Only I had a strong suspicion I'd branded him right back without a single doubt in my mind. Should I even ask what just happened? Does it even matter?*

I didn't feel ashamed of getting lost in our lustful serenade, and deep down, I didn't feel guilty about branding him either - *if I'd successfully accomplished that*. To be truthfully honest, I didn't know what I should feel at this moment.

*Other than peace.*

In my life since losing all order within my world of daily greetings, studies, training, and evening gatherings, I'd lost that sense of peace you achieved after a long day of various activities.

I never acknowledged this emotion that I missed experiencing in the early mornings when the birds chirped and the morning aroma greeted my nostrils. The warmth of the sunlight bled into the room, dancing upon my naked flesh that peeked out of the covers.

*Serenity. Blissfulness. Hope? So many overwhelming emotions.*

"You're allowed to acknowledge you're happy."

My eyes opened once more as I slowly turned my head to my left to see

his half-opened eyes calmly staring into mine.

"Happy," I repeated the word as if I couldn't process it, and maybe I struggled because it had been such a long time. My years with Edwin, Raf, and Grayson indeed brought happy times, but they were short-lived moments and circumstances that invited those spikes of elation in my life.

This level of happiness was different. It was raw, pure, and spiked with relief because it delivered so many other emotions I hadn't enjoyed in many years. How could this man come into my life unexpectedly - *or in my circumstance, be my cushion for my crash landing* - and make me feel so secure in life?

I still worried about Edwin and Raf and hoped that Grayson was found by the Beta to aid in whatever had to be done, but it was all stuff that didn't feel as dreadful as it would have if I were all alone in the wave.

Here I lay beneath this man of strength, and I wished to unravel everything about him. To expand this feeling of happiness and gamble upon the idea of it being something long-lasting rather than a one-hit wonder.

"I'm...happy," I finally admitted, and it felt so weird that I laughed and tried to blink away my tears. He moved his arm just slightly, angling it so his hand could reach out to press against my right cheek and stop me from looking away to hide my flickering emotions.

"What hurt you, Alexandra?" he genuinely asked, my full name leaving his parted lips. He wasn't asking to try to gather information or attempt to use it against me. I could feel within myself in that tunnel of emotion that connected the two of us together that he wished to know why I feared to be loved. Feared this happiness that felt too good to be true.

Unlike anyone I'd met, even Grayson, he wanted to understand me.

There were moments in the last five years where Grayson wished to do that. He asked certain questions randomly, and I answered them in a way that wouldn't reveal my identity because I sadly didn't trust him enough to expose all my cards.

It was all because we weren't officially "something". We cared for one another's bodies, but did we care enough to carry each other's burdens upon our shoulders? I guess I worried the most about the common reality that Grayson's mate would come along, and sadly, I would become nothing but a memory on the horizon of someone he once cared about.

*But this was different.*

Maximus wouldn't simply disappear. He sought to know me so he could protect me from what I feared in this world and that level of noble kindness allowed me to reveal what I hadn't to anyone.

*I told him everything.*

The night of the crowning, the sudden encounter with my mate, the rejection process, and the falling of my world at the hands of the Dark Senator. He listened to every detail, absorbed every tragedy and the path I was forced to take after giving my kingdom a moment of silence.

I followed with the triggering of the first clockwork wave and how Edwin and I were pulled right into it. I continued to explain about our travels of survival, before the path that reunited me with Raf. I went on to how I'd survived the last five years, and my desire to get my anger out through traveling the waves like an Expeditioner and ridding the world of the crooks who fought to murder senselessly while being a lone wolf with my first-in-command.

I brought up Grayson briefly because I wanted him to know that I had been in some type of "relationship" even though it was nothing serious. I finished by telling him about Maeve and her amazing qualities, talents, and slight insanity when power spiked her veins.

When I finished, we lay there in silence for a long moment as he allowed everything to settle in his mind. The wait was killing me, so I decided to add a little dark humor in the mix.

"So...you if you decide to toss me into the arms of the Senator, you have to at least make sure I can make some clothes."

His eyes moved over to give me a blank stare but I continued to smile.

"Can't be handed over to a villain naked, you know. It's bad courtesy."

"You're not going anywhere," he muttered. "I'm just not used to speaking my thoughts."

"Why?"

"When you have three loud-as-fuck brothers, there's no point in trying to get your point across unless they piss you off," he revealed.

"So were you the spoiled one?" I couldn't help but ask. "They say the youngest is always spoiled."

"My mother actually never spoiled me. My father on the other hand loved to do exactly that. I think it was because I was the North born of my siblings and am destined to rule."

"You go by directional births as well," I whispered.

"Your kingdom does?"

"Did," I corrected with a sad smile. "I was North. My younger brother was South."

He went quiet again, but his eyes drifted down to my chest.

"Does it still hurt?"

"If I don't lower my gaze, I can give myself a few extra minutes of wonder as to what I've just done," I admitted.

"Scared?"

"Of the fact I may have just bonded with a sexy, hot Alpha who potentially hits all my ideal fantasies, is willing to listen to my sob story, and isn't the normal cocky type like every other Alpha on the block?" I summed up. "Not really. I'm just wondering what it looks like because in the ancient books, imprints look atrocious in nature."

His low chuckle surprised me as I pouted my lips and watched his eyes soften as they admired me. "I'm cocky when I have to be, and I speak up amongst my pack or else they'd be a bunch of hooligans doing stupid shit. I'm not going to worry about the mayhem they may leave behind, but with the

sudden occurrence of how we ended up here, they may send a few Betas over."

"You mean the armed men aren't a part of your pack?" I inquired

"They're more of my security when mingling with other royals. It's standard for the Frost Kingdom. Well, more importantly, my mom hates when I enter waves on my own. My actual pack is on the outskirts of NYC currently. We just arrived here for business from Toronto. We enjoy Canadian land because they have more forestry and don't deal with waves."

"I thought waves were a worldwide thing," I voiced. The conversation shift was interesting, and I genuinely wanted to know more about him.

"Clockwork waves only occur in certain states of US, sections of Toronto in Canada, and all of Dubai, Singapore, Japan, South Korea, and Africa."

"What about India, Australia, China, and England?" I tossed out a few that stood out to me.

He shook his head. "None. Sometimes Voids can pop up in those areas and trigger a wave, but it's not permanent."

"For us, we define Void Mastery as the realms only accessible through the waves. Like what we're currently in," I shared a bit of my knowledge.

"You're correct, but the word Void is derived from how the waves were triggered to begin with. Voids are always formed from a conjured spike of darkness and bloodshed. If you look up the exact coordinates of every first wave, it was in a place where there was plenty of bloodshed that triggered the clockwork wave to begin its movement."

"So is that why my kingdom seems to be the 'base' of this clockwork world?"

"That would make sense. It was the freshest occurrence with the flooding of the Dark Senator's black magic. There may have been an artifact that triggered the clockwork, but it's just one of the many theories my Beta, Simon, has gathered."

"How many Betas do you have?"

"Three, but it'll probably go down to two. Beta Simon and Beta Yuri. I'll be getting rid of Beta Eric soon."

"Intriguing," I whispered and decided to take one last second of grace before taking in the sternum tattoo that moved right between my breasts from above my cleavage to close to my belly button.

My tense body calmed entirely as I took in the snowflake floral piece that was inked in black but was colored in with the very shades that resonated with my soul. The black ink outlined various snowflakes in detail as blooming roses of pink and orange peeked through the icy stems of each flake. The stems of the roses were dark teal that held a slight ivory green undertone, and the bottom part held sparks of flames in orange and gold with hints of red.

It looked more like a tattoo that had been designed just for me, and I was even more curious about the symbolism behind it.

"Wow." I was honestly speechless because no way had any of the imprint markings been this detailed or richly colored. They looked like hideous marks of plagued memories caused by force.

Claw marks, lacerations, slashes from a blade, everything you could imagine representing the ownership of one person over another. This looked far too magnificent. Maybe it was what I needed to allow myself to accept that I was privileged to enjoy good things.

*That not all pain left wounds of agony behind.*

"Alpha Maximus...it's beautiful."

He reached out to lightly stroke the design, leaving me to quiver before I further relaxed at the chilled touch of his fingertips.

"Max," he quietly muttered.

I looked at him once more as he continued to trace the sensitive lines while his eyes moved to meet mine. "You can just call me Max."

"Max," I repeated. "I like when you call me Alexandra."

"Do you?" he inquired with interest.

"Normally I let everyone call me Alexis to hide my identity. A few people know, except for Grayson. He knows my name is Alexandra, but not my heritage."

"He wouldn't use Alexandra in bed?" he inquired, which was probably because of my earlier request.

"He always called me Alexis when we climaxed. It wasn't necessarily a big deal."

"But it was important to you," he concluded. "If it's important to be used, it's a big deal."

I stared into his eyes for a long moment. "Maybe so," I admitted. "I guess...I worried that I'd be overreacting over something so small."

"Size doesn't determine whether something is important to someone," he explained. "I'll aim to call you Alexandra when I'm pounding you into oblivion."

I blushed as I could only imagine the wonderful chaos this man would evoke on my body.

"What's your...preference when it comes to sex?" I felt a little shy with the question, which wasn't usually the case for me, but I guess everything felt a little new in this situation.

"As in?"

"Do you like...you know..." I took a moment to think and let it all out in a blur of words. "Being all Alpha dominant and pinning your woman to a wall and fucking her senseless? Or claiming complete domination over her by laying a bunch of hickeys across her body and slaps upon her ass? Or holding her in a throat hold as you fuck her senseless? Or, even better, grabbing a bunch of her hair, spinning her around, and just kissing her like she's the last thing you'd ever taste before the world ends? Or-"

His hand moved to slide into my short locks, gripping enough to tug me forward until his lips locked onto mine and he proceeded to devour me in a sensual kiss that made me moan and close my eyes to enjoy the passionate

ride.

"All the above," he breathed. "As long as you enjoy being defiant."

"I can be very defiant," I purred.

"Good," he whispered with a tiny smile. "I like that."

*Goddess of the Moon really blessed me with the man of my damn fantasies.*

The way his lips further quirked up made me pout before I mentally cursed.

"You heard that?"

"Indeed, I did," he assured me. "Glad I meet your standards. Want to tell me how large your imprint is?"

"Oh!" I sat up slowly and looked at his back only to gawk. "Uh...did...you by chance have any tattoos on your back before?"

"No," he admitted. "My tattoos are on my front side and arms only. I never got the time to put some on my back."

"Mhmm." I couldn't really reply because I was so fascinated with the vivid design that I wasn't sure how to explain it.

"I have a feeling I should be afraid," he muttered.

"No," I answered after a few seconds. "It's...really beautiful."

"For a man?"

"For anyone," I admitted. "But..." I was trying not to get emotional because this imprint wasn't your average design.

*No. It showed the cliff of a kingdom I yearned to see from my past one last time, only two wolves stood on the cliff, howling towards the full moon.*

It was as detailed as if it had come out of my very mind, and it took up a good chunk of his back. My shaky hand reached out to trace the outlines of the castle, noticing how even the twinkling stars in the sky replicated the view I recalled viewing with my little brother's hand in mine as my parents, Edwin, and Raf stood behind us watching before the fireworks that were set to celebrate my twentieth birthday.



*To celebrate the day I'd become queen.*

"Alexandra."

I couldn't speak as my tears spilled onto his back. I sniffed and looked away before I slipped right off the bed and headed into what my instincts told me was the bathroom. I didn't mean to run away but I knew what was coming as those emotions took the reins in this situation and fought to be seen.

*Fought to be felt by the individual who desperately wished for them to remain in their enclosed captivity for the sake of my sanity.*

"I just need a moment," I finally voiced and tried to close the door, but it was far too late for that for the beast of an Alpha was already in the small space. My hand was pressing against his chest instead of the doorknob.

There was no way for me to get further away, and maybe he wouldn't let me because he pulled me against him, my back pressed firmly against his front side as he closed the door of the tiny space and locked it.

All I could do was cover my face with my hands as I fought hard not to cave. When was the last time I'd had a breakdown in front of anyone? Months? Years? I couldn't fathom when these feelings had come out for air.

This was bad timing and yet they begged so desperately to be freed into the world, and my walls of confidence were crumbling down, piece by piece, brick by brick.

My muffled whimper made me bite my lip as hard as I could to stop myself from breaking the persona I'd molded from that very day, and yet the strong pang of agony burned my very chest that ached for home - that constant craving to return to those tall stone walls of warmth that were filled with baked aromas and floral ensembles.

"Alexandra." Max's husky voice was at my ear, and a sob left out of my lips before I fought to push him away.

"You...can't see me like this," I pleaded. "Just five minutes and I'll be done."

"And what kind of mate would I be?" he tossed back and only held me

tighter. "Let it out, my queen. Those emotions aren't to be kept like treasures."

"But...if they're gone...I'll lose them all," I choked out as my hands slowly lowered and my arms dropped in defeat. "They're my drive to vengeance. To...push myself forward. Without the pain...I'll forget. I can't forget them. All the fallen. All the bloodshed. It's the strength I need to push harder than ever."

"Strength doesn't come from pain, Alexandra," he whispered gently as he cradled me in his massive arms. I felt so tiny within his grasp, and yet his devotion contributed to the contentment his company delivered. "Strength comes through healing. By letting go of the hurt and allowing the wounds to heal."

"I can't forget, Maximus," I practically cried because that was what I feared most amongst the many worries I hid in the shadows. I feared forgetting every single individual who lost their lives and getting so content with this new side of life that I'd never avenge them.

"Just because a wound is healed, that doesn't mean the scars aren't left behind, Alexandra," he quietly reasoned. "Let the flesh heal, allow yourself to truly mourn what was lost, but even as those wounds patch together, scars will remain and allow you to recall what you've experienced. They will remind you that you're a survivor and motivate you to achieve what needs to be done to deliver retribution to all those who were lost to ensure your survival. You won't be like the world that forgot about your kingdom. You will be the flame that lights up a torch that the world will have no choice but to see and acknowledge the roots you came from."

My body shook as his lips gently pressed against the left side of my neck, followed by my shoulder, and then all the way over to my chest just over my heart.

"Let it free, Queen of Flames. Let it free."

*So I did.*

I let it all out as I cried and sobbed uncontrollably. I confronted the images of the past in my mind and accepted each face that flashed by as I mourned their loss. I cried for the loss of the land, the trees, the creatures, and the peacefulness our kingdom had delivered to my upbringing. I said farewell to the knowledge lost in ancient books and the little towns that held little perks if wisdom in their small stone walls.

I reviewed my past on fast-forward until I had to face the final hurdle: *the old me.*

The image of my wild eyes that were filled with fright at the burning flames of our kingdom danced in my orbs. The way I trembled at the sight as the crown rested upon my head - the weight of my responsibilities seemingly light because the world around me was far too heavy to bear.

I'd ignored the reality that I was still so innocent. I may have trained to be a ruler, but I was finally given the opportunity to put action into my promised words only for it to never prosper as that right was stolen out from under my feet.

She didn't deserve to be hit at every angle, cutting her flesh, wounding her heart, and plaguing her soul with immense guilt. The old me was a wounded soldier who only needed my support to live.

*But I wished for her to die.*

To be buried like the rest of the emotions that disabled me. That was my way of coping. To shove all my pain in a closet in hopes it would never come out. But Maximus saw it all, felt what I hid out of shame, and now I understood why this was necessary.

*Why he wished for me to conquer this all.*

He wanted me to truly move forward, for harder challenges awaited us. Tougher confrontations that would potentially make their mark on our flesh, and they would dig deep enough to leave scars.

My strength from my past would shine brightly in the present and save me from the pain the future would bring as I strived for change.

*Strived to seek vengeance for the throne that deserves to be ruled by me.*

"Goodbye," I whispered to her as if it were the final farewell, and maybe it was as that image of the old me looked into my eyes and smiled.

*The hope in her eyes, the twinkling pride and overall acceptance that it was time to lay her to rest was relieving.*

She'd had her time in two decades of my life, and though she'd been destroyed by the enemy's wrath, her sacrifices wouldn't be forgotten. She was still a part of who I once was, and thanks to my innocence, I'd been able to move forward into a realm of maturity that I needed to take on this new adventure.

*Change in this world was inevitable, but if you remembered where you came from, you'd never lose yourself on the vast journey called life.*

When my tears finally stopped and my sobs calmed, I slowly turned in Max's embrace and allowed him to pull me into an actual hug. I hugged him back as tightly as I could, hoping he could feel just how important this was for me.

In this foreign ship, he'd been a stranger that suddenly shifted into someone of far more importance. He'd accepted a role that was tossed into his life, and instead of rejecting me like the one from the past, here he was, comforting and aiding me on this path of healing.

He did something others wouldn't do for me even though I'd been in their lives for years, and it proved how amazing life could be. You could meet someone in a heartbeat and feel as if you'd known them for centuries or know someone for decades and feel like nothing but strangers.

Some souls aligned better than others, but Alpha Maximus Atlas was officially more than that. The mark upon his back - the imprint created at the peak of pleasure - proved that he was now my mate, and the magnificent mark upon my flesh proved that he accepted it with open arms.

In my life of chaos, I'd finally found a speck of peace, and I couldn't be happier to have a shoulder to lean on in the realms of romance. All of this

made me realize that I'd never truly dated someone, and it was enough for me to pull back enough to look into his calming snowflake eyes.

"I've never...dated someone seriously before. Let alone been mated long enough to try."

He didn't seem worried about it as he slowly nodded and moved his arms away from my waist to lightly brush his hands along my cheeks.

"Then I'll show you just what's like to be mated to an Alpha of Frost."

That made me smile as I noticed his eyes lower to my lips.

"Want to kiss me?" I whispered.

"Ya," he admitted.

"Then what's stopping you?"

He didn't seem nervous in the slightest as he leaned in close enough for our lips to be centimeters apart.

"I wanted to ask you first," he confessed, which surprised me. He followed up with, "Without our wolves riding up our asses, it's just you and me. My mom always told me if I wished to kiss a woman, the first time, I should ask."

His words and mention of his mom actually made me smile fully as my eyes softened in admiration. "Your mom surely raised you well."

"She had three other trials," he whispered and winked. We quietly laughed, and he dropped the simple question. "Alexandra Wolf, can I kiss you?"

"Certainly, Maximus Atlas."

This kiss was smooth, deep, and rich with emotion as I allowed myself to get lost in his mouth and the movement of his rough lips against mine. This one wasn't filled with raging hunger or intense heat, but instead filled with a cooling lull that allowed me to ponder what the future had in store for me.

I'd entered this wave out of desperation to survive with my comrades, and somehow a night had shifted into the realms of the morning and delivered me an unexpected mate that I chose to claim in return.

What left me more curious was the thought of the man with evergreen eyes. His memory didn't bring pain anymore, a shocking surprise when he'd been one of the key triggers of my suffering for years and up until mating another.

Our kiss wasn't too long or short. It was the perfect length of emotional connection before we took a cold shower. The hot water was having technical difficulties, though neither of us had a problem with sharing a shower.

I managed to summon some lingerie for myself, but clothes were going to be a problem since my body still needed a few hours of cooldown. I brought it up after we brushed our teeth and I got a comb through my wild pink and white strands.

"I don't think I can make any more clothes," I admitted. "I've used too much magic."

"What happened to land you here in the first place?" he inquired as he admired my body with his eyes. He was clearly checking me out, so I purposely said something in a different language in response.

"Uh-huh," he replied, which left me snickering.

"So you used to be a poop scooper?"

He blinked and actually met my amused gaze before my words kicked in.

"Fuck no," he huffed, and I laughed.

"Pay attention," I sweetly ordered, but gave him a brief summary of what happened.

"When we return, NYC is going to be a fucking mess," he grumbled. "Do you have plans for when you return?"

"I have to regroup with Edwin, Raf, and Grayson. Edwin goes a bit ape shit when he has no idea where I am. I don't want to be the reason a bunch of people die unnecessarily. After that, I have no plans. I don't work. I just spend my time doing expeditions on my own and killing those who try to kill others pulled into the waves."

"That's a job," he voiced.

"Huh?" I stared at him as he unlocked the door to the washroom and opened it to retrieve something from the single dresser. I followed and watched him don the simple white shirt and black sweatpants.

"Death Expeditioners. That's what the duty is called. It's normally given to wolf shifters because we have a strong sense of smell and can find body parts. The royals hire them as well as the government on the surface to potentially prevent senseless murders that occur to innocent supernaturals who get pulled into the Void for the first time and are unsure how to defend themselves."

"I want a job like that," I whined. "Good alibi for why I'm with you."

He actually looked to be thinking about it as I walked over to him.

"Crouch down for a second." He didn't seem suspicious of my request, especially with our current height difference. I seriously needed my heels because I wasn't about this short life.

He crouched down as I reached out to tug his shirt off his body. With a pleased grin, he watched me put the white shirt on my body. The shirt that barely had space for his massive stature was a loose dress on my body.

He rose back up, but I wasn't done as I tugged on his waistband a few times.

"What are you doing?" he inquired.

"You don't need this," I voiced.

"My pants?"

"Oh no. This," I replied and tugged on the drawstring that was pretty worthless seeing as the waist of his pants fit his circumference perfectly. With the black string in my grasp, I walked over to the mirror hanging on the wall behind the washroom door. I proceeded to wrap the string around my waist until it cinched the top perfectly.

Ruffling my fingers through my hair to give it a bit more body, I smiled in approval as I turned around to see the outfit covered my ass and reached just above my knees.

"There," I replied as I looked at him and admired his bare chest. "Best of both worlds."

"Your nipples are going to show through that," he muttered in disapproval.

I laughed and walked over to him. "I'm wearing a bra. My nipples aren't going anywhere."

"It's too short."

"Just above knee-length is the requirement in schools and workplaces," I argued.

"It's white."

That excuse deserved a "really" look, and he huffed while moving his hands to run through his extremely long hair. "Those bastards are going to be sexualizing you in their minds and that just pisses me off," he confessed.

"They won't," I assured him and tugged on the V-neck part of the shirt so my cleavage - or specifically my new imprint mark - was proudly on display. "Can't fantasize about someone who's already claimed."

He stared at me long enough that I noticed the way his cheeks began to flood with light red, leaving me grinning from ear to ear. He quickly realized he was blushing and that only ignited anger on his face.

"Don't get mad," I hummed in delight. "Shall we go up? I think I went past the six-hour time frame."

"No one will harm you," he assured me.

"I know," I quietly answered because I felt in my heart it was true. "Though I can handle myself."

"I'm aware of that one," he stated with a light smile before his eyes moved to the door. It took me an added second to sense someone was indeed at the door, so I decided to do the honors of opening it as a single knock hit the wooden surface.

Max didn't stop me as I reached for the knob and opened the door, but what stopped my words from escaping my throat was the man standing at the



door. My eyes locked onto his.

*Eyes of evergreen.*

## THE PAST CONFRONTS THE PRESENT

**M**y brain immediately thought of two paths I could walk upon in this pivotal moment: slam the door in this man's face or smile and slam the door in this man's face.

*Oh, Moon Goddess, how gloriously fun it would be to do that. Maybe light him up in flames by accident and seduce Max to pretend he saw nothing. Hmm. Could I get away with murder in this prime moment? Maybe...*

***"You do realize he can hear every single thought of yours, right?"***

*Eve? You're awake?*

***"Your spike of astonishment woke me up."***

*Right...so...about handling murder?*

***"You're hopeless. Alpha Maximus can hear you."***

*Oh, I'm aware. All I have to worry about is whether he'll be my accomplice in this deed or if I can promise him wild sex for a year to compensate.*

***"You'd give him wild sex regardless!"***

*True. Alright, Option B.*

I could feel Max's curiosity within that newly formed passage of emotions between us, but I returned my full attention to the man from my past.

*The individual with evergreen eyes who was standing at this proximity when he shared that moment of bliss before ripping the idea of a shared*

*future into shambles.*

He'd barely aged, though his hair was jet black and messy like he'd walked through a tornado to arrive here. His attire was all black, appearing more like he had been when he worked alongside the Senator to kill anything that moved upon our lands.

*Except for me.*

For a moment, it felt like we were back in that dark hallway as the moonlight shone through the windows and illuminated his frame as he stood before me.

*Only now, I wasn't that pliable girl so lost in those feelings of excitement.*

His eyes pulled away from mine as his nostrils flared to clearly take in my scent. Something flashed in his eyes that lowered to my chest, and I was sure he thought I'd missed the flicker of emotion, but I caught it without a missing beat and boy did my heart beat with glee.

*Jealousy.*

His head was forced to lift upward because my hand was under his chin and lifting it up myself. My smile was defiant with a dose of seductive fierceness - all while I allowed myself to stand tall and powerful in this first impression moment.

*More like second impression.*

"Eyes up here, Evergreen," I teased. "Special goods are for mates only."

**"Burn,"** Eve literally hollered. **"Watch his face! Watch his face."**

Oh, I did that and more as I pulled back my hand and saw that flash of jealousy yet again. The poor man was struggling as he took in my entire appearance - taking in the woman he'd rejected.

*The Rejected Queen he'd spared in hopes she'd be as invisible as her fallen kingdom.*

When our eyes met once more, I boldly enjoyed the staring match as the words in my mind pulsed through my eyes.

***Am I now worthy of your attention?***

***Does my body enlighten you?***

***Has my growth ignited feelings of regret?***

***Or does my return make you wish you'd never rejected me?***

***Do I make you uncomfortable?***

***For that's exactly what you deserve.***

My lips further grinned as I mentally vowed what he knew would destroy everything he'd worked so hard for.

***I'll ruin it all until you have nothing.***

***Would that make you realize how tight the shoe fits?***

***Or maybe you'll understand the reason for Karma's scrutiny.***

My silent declaration wasn't very "silent," for I'd sent those words into his mind with the Alpha ability I possessed in my blood. He was fighting the shock as he finally tugged his eyes away from me and tried to play his own game.

"Alpha Maximus, I've returned." He bowed his head slightly before continuing, "There's some commotion on deck."

The way I grinned could get me thrown into a mental institution as I knew Max was putting one and two together. My new mate wasn't foolish, and I was hundred percent confident that he'd piece the puzzle together and see the full picture.

*Connect the dots to the crime and determine the murderer was in pure sight.*

However, I could spice things up further by torturing this man into thinking his Alpha was still a fool - *and that I could allow him to continue his duty or destroy everything he's worked hard for with the snap of my fingers.*

"It must be my acquaintances," I announced as I slowly turned around and made my way towards Alpha Maximus. I walked carefully, ensuring my hips moved in a way that could hypnotize and claim a man's eyes from near or far.

I occasionally helped Raf on busy nights because when push came to

shove, I could command a room without trying. This was no different, only I was making this man pay by taunting him the best way I knew how.

"I may have to go," I reasoned with Max as his eyes met mine. He was reading me like an open book while admiring the pulsating power radiating off my body. I could feel the way his heartbeat began to increase while he slowly bit his bottom lip.

I bet his cock was growing hard as we continued our intense stare, but I couldn't help but continue on with my deed as my hand lifted until my single finger encouraged him to lean down.

He did what I asked, low enough for me to go on my tiptoes and lightly kiss his cheek.

"Once I've discussed the change of plans, let's talk privately about some new occurrences. I think it could change our dynamic and form some new contracts."

I lowered and slowly moved my tongue along my lips to moisten them before turning around to walk away.

Evergreen couldn't hide his emotions that were written all over his face. I prepared to leave, but a hand hooked around the front side of my throat, pulling me back until I was pressed against the lower half of Max's chest and tightening enough to force me to look up.

That was when he kissed me, the move completely unexpected as he purposely pressed the bulge of his sweatpants against my ass.

I could feel his hardness, and I wished to simply bend down and allow this makeshift dress to rise and reveal the black hipster panties that hugged my flesh. It would give him a glimpse of my pussy, which was beginning to throb at this sudden move of dominance.

*This was fucking hot.*

"Did I say you could go?" he growled in warning as his grip tightened further. If we didn't have an audience, I'd be a defiant wolf to pester him further, but I had to play along with this change of script.

"No, Alpha," I attempted to squeak but goodness, it sounded like a high-pitched moan, in all honesty. My body was clearly winning at this game.

"You're on my ship, Alexis," he reminded me as if I'd forgotten before he silenced whatever words I could have said by slamming his mouth brutally against mine. I gasped in hopes of acting surprised, but it only pressed the pedal as his tongue darted inside to roam my mouth like he fucking owned it.

*Goddess, he could fucking own my entire body and I'd be the happiest woman in Void Mastery.*

My body grew hot as he put on a show, feasting on me like a savory meal that he'd enjoy again and again if he could. His hips further pressed against my ass, while I fought to remain still, but I shivered at his chilled touch as his free right hand moved along my thigh, lifting up the white cloth until he maneuvered his way between my legs.

My mind couldn't fathom what Max was planning to do, and yet I recalled studying this during my teenage days. When a wolf threatened another in trying to take what he'd already claimed, the threatened wolf would display dominance to prove his ownership.

*Had Max caught onto Evergreen's jealousy? Was he now displaying dominance so that Evergreen got the message loud and clear?*

I stilled completely as my breath hitched, feeling his icy cold fingers tug the fabric of my panties to the side. He didn't need to do anything as the scent of my juices drifted into the air, and he managed to take a deep inhale while my lips were still locked in his possessive hold.

**"You're mine."** His deep Alpha voice sent jolts of heat through me, all while his fingers enjoyed the glistening surface of my folds. My arousal shot up further knowing Evergreen was watching all of this, proving that he had to be in Max's pack or else he wouldn't continue to stand there.

*Evergreen was locked in by the command of his Alpha, and unless dismissed, he had to stand there and witness him enjoy my taste while his fingers sought to leave me dripping wet.*

He sucked my swollen lips and nipped my bottom lip, before ravaging my mouth in a kiss so sizzling hot, it left me dizzy. I further leaned into his hold as he reached the conclusion I was ready for his fingers. He plunged not one but two fingers in straight away - the action triggering a drawn-out moan that echoed against the walls of his mouth.

I further arched into him while he cupped my pussy with his two fingers deep inside me.

"What happens when you disobey me, Alexis?" he tested me as his lips rubbed against mine. His eyes, oozing power, met my lust-filled ones.

"You get punished." I went along with the show, hoping my answers met his taste. He smirked like an evil ruler as he slid his fingers out and slammed them back in, making me whimper as my body jolted from the move.

"Yes. You get punished. That's why you're going to endure these fingers fucking you until you cum all over them in front of Beta Eric. He's going to stand there and watch every single movement, and you're going to enjoy it. Understood?"

I tried not to answer because I wanted to be defiant at the idea of Evergreen, aka Beta Eric, witnessing what was intimate between us. Deep down this was exactly the plan I wanted, and Max knew it.

He tightened his grip to the point that it closed my airway while he moved to bite deeply into the nape of my neck. I struggled to whimper as he pulled back and whispered, "Understood, Alexis?"

He loosened his hold to allow me to speak.

"Understood." I choked out the single word. He knew how all of this foreplay was affecting me, my pussy quivering around his fingers. I was sure the insides were scorching hot and dripping with wetness now, while my nipples were hard and pressing firmly against my bralette. I was sure they could press through the lace and poke their way into visibility.

"Good," he rasped before he took my lips captive once more and began to eat me up with his mouth as he growled down my throat. He did this while

his fingers began to move, pumping into me swiftly and yet finding a rhythm that bounced between fast and agonizingly slow.

He knew how to use those long, sinful fingers of his as he circled his movements before pumping really fast, alternating with spreading them out as far as he could and pulling them out to make me gasp and whimper in pleading desperation.

My breath hitched as he began to really plunge in and out of me at a cruel speed that had my legs trembling, and he growled when he felt my approaching orgasm because he wasn't ready for me to finish.

"Hold it," he dared as he came to a dramatic stop and held my throat tightly once more. "You won't cum until I tell you." I expected him to move but he remained still while it felt like something dinged in his mind like a flash of a lightbulb.

"Actually, no," he declined the previous idea. "Beta Eric will do the honors of saying when you should cum."

My eyes widened, and I briefly lowered my head enough to see his eyes widen at the offered moment of power. However, he looked fearful in comparison to that cocky expression of achievement he'd displayed after breaking my heart.

Max tightened his hold on my throat once more and I lifted my head up to see those orbs of fury that were almost white in colors while those mystical hues peeked through in warning.

"Eyes on me," he demanded with a seething voice.

I should have feared him and yet my pussy fluttered at the alluring sound of his husky voice. "Yes, Alpha."

That pleased him enough to move, only he took things further as he suddenly let go of my throat, only to lift one of my legs up. I held back a gasp as I balanced my weight on my one leg. Thank goodness I was flexible because he held my leg right up so my toes pointed to the ceiling like a ballerina ready to pull a grand move that would stun the audience.



This position definitely stunned Beta Eric because his eyes were on my exposed pussy as juices began to roll down the side of my leg. The chilled breeze in the air only accented my exposure while the heat of the sunlight against our backs pointed out that it was broad daylight and anyone could waltz down here to get Alpha Maximus for whatever commotion was going on above.

I had to stop thinking about it because the mere thought was inching me closer to the orgasm my body was striving to achieve, but I resisted as I tried to calm my breathing. Max just had to be extra cruel as he purposely thrust fast and deep.

He wanted me to fail, and yet I didn't want to find out what failure would lead to. If this was my "punishment" for not being dismissed by him, what would he do if I came without Beta Eric's permission?

He was doing all of this on purpose, showing Eric the power he carried with just his fingers. He wanted him to see that even my pussy was his to claim, and no matter his temporary control, he wouldn't get this opportunity to have an inch of power over me because I was Alpha Maximus's.

I was reaching my limit when I couldn't help but lower my eyes to see the way Beta Eric shook. He was so turned on, the bulge in his pants so fucking obvious, and yet he wouldn't be allowed to even touch me.

This was the ultimate way of torturing him without physically tormenting him. Allowing him to see the woman he'd rejected being fucked by his Alpha's fingers and forced to smell the high of my lust.

"Cum," Beta Eric demanded, but I bit my lip and tuned out the power such a word had over me. I heard the thrum of a growl against his throat before he spoke again, "Cum!"

Again, I was as disobedient as ever even though I struggled against the irresistible urge to come undone.

"**Cum!**" he ordered a third time and I sensed the added authority, as if he were supposed to be my Alpha in this agonizing game, but again, he had no

control over me.

*Not anymore. He'd lost that power over me, and I'd simply affirmed it in front of his very Alpha.*

"Why won't you cum, Alexis?" The prime question was asked with hidden merriment as I lifted my head once more to look into Max's eyes.

He was searching for my answer in my eyes as if he couldn't understand why I hadn't followed his plot to the very end. If he couldn't grasp it, I'd simply have to answer truthfully.

"My loyalty is only to you."

That struck a chord, one that made his eyes widen for a mere moment as he absorbed my reply. I meant every word. He'd slowed a few notches, but then his fingers went into overdrive as they found the perfect spot and rode deeply into me as a proud expression flooded the lines of his face.

"Then cum for me." The tender plea was all I needed to hear to make me explode in ecstasy. My cry was muffled by his mouth, which took in the choked sound while my body shook with the high tides of my orgasm.

We remained still for a solid minute as our emotions molded together like two liquid forces becoming one. The immense pride he carried for me was shocking to me, a sensation I never thought someone could carry for someone unless they were blood-related.

He was proud of me for my resistance, but more importantly, my ability to remain loyal to only him. No one else had that power now that we'd marked each other, and this was the test he needed to prove I wouldn't slip out of his fingers.

"Good girl," he praised and allowed me to gasp for breath as he let go of me. He slid his fingers out of me before slipping my panties back to cover my exposed entrance. Letting go of my leg with his other hand, he allowed me to lower it back down while he showed me his fingers, cloaked with creamy white juice.

"That's the power I have over you, **Mate.**" He used the final word on

purpose, and I caught onto the way Beta Eric's eyes widened like saucers.

Max took that moment to move those very fingers to his mouth and suck them dry as I watched in utter amazement. The way my insides flipped, fluttered, and grew hot at the sight turned me on all over again - enough to make Max smile delightedly. His lips puckered when he pulled out the cleaned fingers and licked his lips.

As one final move, he leaned over to give me one final kiss, giving me the opportunity to taste myself in his mouth.

"Your punishment is over. I'll be up there in a minute," he concluded and let go of me. "I need a moment with Beta Eric and then I'll be up there to view what this commotion is all about."

"Okay," I replied but didn't move this time. He noticed why, and he didn't hide his amusement as he grinned in satisfaction. "You may go, Alexis."

"Thank you, Alpha," I replied with a smile that proved just how much I enjoyed that rollercoaster of Pleasureville.

With one last glance into his snowflake eyes, I turned away and headed to the door. Beta Eric moved further to the side to allow me to pass, but he made sure our eyes locked for that brief passing moment.

I allowed him to see the severity of my power that glimmered in my eyes as Eve pushed so close to the surface, I surely freaked him out in the second we had to make full contact. There was no denying what I witnessed as fear flashed within his forest eyes before I silently made my way to the doorway.

Turning around, I bowed my head slightly and reached for the knob of the door. "I'll close the door, Alpha."

"Thank you," he replied, and his voice lost any hint of affection as he shifted into Alpha business mode. To say Beta Eric's fear wasn't obvious would be a blatant lie.

He was practically quivering as he looked over his shoulder to see my cruel smile.

"Then I'll be on my way," I assured him and began to close the door. I

took one final look at Beta Eric, acknowledging those evergreen eyes that thrummed with despair.

Never would I have imagined feeling this level of empowerment because of the man I'd envisioned suffering at my very hands.

Instead of cloaking my hands in blood, Alpha Maximus Atlas had just started something far better.

*The downfall of Rejecter at the hands of the Rejected. What a bittersweet demise courtesy of my playful Alpha mate.*



## ALLIANCE AGAINST A VILLAIN

**"[ LIKE HIM! Thank you, Blessed Goddess of the Moon up high! "**

My eyes rolled at Maeve's enthusiasm while I borrowed Richard's washroom. The moment I'd closed the door to Max's room, he'd opened the door to his. As embarrassing as it would have been to acknowledge the possible fact that he'd not only heard everything from last night, but enjoyed my moaning punishment that just occurred, I didn't let him see a hint of remorse in my actions as he carried on greeting me like it was no big deal.

He, too, was heading up to the surface level to see what the commotion was about, but also received the delivery of some magic-made clothes from one of the crew members who somehow managed to create a crop top and black shorts. They had even found a way to make some fishnet stockings that mimicked my attire from when I'd first landed on the ship.

I guess I'd made a good impression and was rewarded with clothes. It was perfect timing because although I was bold enough to waltz up there in this white sheer t-shirt, I probably risked getting the whole crew killed.

*That would be bad.*

What surprised me was the pair of boots Richard presented to me, saying he always carried a pair of heeled boots for his wife and daughter because they had a thing for wearing them before cutting enemies' throats.

*So fucking cool.*

I never would have thought Beta Eric had a sister. To think he was able to break my heart, but surely would have never stood for another man to shatter his sister's. He stated she was younger than him, but after a quick mention of my age, I realized she was the same age as me.

Eric was twenty-eight, and Richard hinted that Alpha Maximus was a year older, so I assumed he was twenty-nine now unless both their birthdays approached later in the year.

He'd offered for me to change in his washroom and walked away as if nothing else had occurred. I was so damn thankful because realistically, UTIs were a pain in the ass, even for wolf shifters, and frankly, I didn't want to potentially kick ass with a wet pussy.

*Totally uncomfortable.*

After using the bathroom and cleaning myself up quickly, I changed into my new set of clothes, which fit pretty perfectly. The shorts really accentuated my plump ass, revealing my tattoo that was half-full of color. It was a good sign because it meant we probably had another twenty-four hours before we were pulled back to the surface.

The crop top wasn't as loose as I'd like, but it at least hovered right above the bottom of my breasts, so unless I was lifting my arms up the entire time, I shouldn't have a problem.

I raked my hands through my hair. I had enough magic to do a pinch of make-up on my face and cloaked my lips with my favorite dark plum lipstick with a hint of gloss.

I missed my fingerless gloves, but I'd work without them until I could replace them above the surface. With the slip of my feet into the boots, I sighed in relief at my rise in height, thankful for the 5" boots that brought me up to 5'8".

I really wasn't about the short life, but my final "growth spurt" was severely delayed due to the plaguing stress of what occurred after the crowning. All wolf shifters got one more growth spurt at twenty, but mine

just never carried through.

There wasn't any evidence about whether I'd experience it later on in my life or if I completely fucked it up. I felt within my soul that I should have been taller, but I guess it was just another one of those losses I couldn't gain back.

*I just had to accept it.*

"Your enthusiasm is going to make me believe you actually have a preference for Alpha men," I voiced out loud as I looked into the mirror and bobbed my head at the final look.

***"I've always had preference in men - cough - Grayson is a weak snob with a decent cock - cough."***

I rolled my eyes again before I shook my head and stared into my own eyes at the thought of breaking the news to Grayson. I knew the moment he saw the imprint on my chest that things would be over, but what I feared more was losing his friendship.

It wasn't like I wouldn't have been with him, it was simply the lack of commitment on his end that stopped us from being a thing. I may not have experienced every side of Alpha Maximus just yet, but Max was hitting every damn point in my checklist - *a list I didn't realize I had.*

He was confident as an Alpha, reserved and quiet but bold and powerful when pushed into a situation where he had to display such authority. He did a fine job in our sudden round of sex, and he was a good listener, which was something I didn't realize I needed.

He held a nurturing side within him, something that probably helped him be a true Alpha of his pack and ensure each member was taken care of when push came to shove, and he wasn't afraid to show his dominance and control, as we'd just experienced firsthand.

Grayson, my friends-with-benefits partner, was like the trial package and Max was the supreme-deluxe, ALL-IN-ONE deal with bonus perks and a mail-in rebate that included packaging.



*Bonus points because Eve actually approved of him.*

If Maeve approved of him, there was a massive chance Edwin would, and if he was fine with it, so was Raf. That basically checked off everyone but Grayson, and that was what worried me.

If we weren't friends with benefits, would we still be just friends?

"How are we going to tell him?"

***"There'll be no telling,"*** Eve stated the obvious. ***"He'll see he was far too late and has to pay the consequences. You snooze, you lose in this world. You were a damn gamble that he surprisingly got a taste of. The fact that he couldn't hit a home run was a complete fail on his part. Like we've said: one man's trash is another's treasure. Maybe he'll learn to stop beating around the bush of love and claim what's in his current possession."***

She had a point and I couldn't argue in the slightest. I'd given him the chance to claim me. He'd had so many times to be a man and take this relationship to the next level, but he'd grown comfortable.

*Maybe we both had.*

I needed someone to be there. Physically and sexually. He wasn't always there emotionally, and it wasn't his fault because I wouldn't allow myself to rely on him in that department. When he was around, he was present and dove into various conversations like friends would normally do, and when we were horny based on the moon's alignment, we fucked and allowed ourselves to get lost in the pleasure our unity delivered.

We benefitted from one another, which was exactly what our status delivered. Nothing more, nothing less. He couldn't get angry at me because of this change in our paths.

With a few deep inhales, I worked on centering myself. After a night of pleasure and a morning of mayhem, I had to return to my badass bitch self and focus on regrouping with Edwin, Raf, and Grayson.

One last stare in the mirror, and I was ready.

*"I'll be on standby,"* Eve reassured me. I bet she sensed I was slightly nervous, but would remain close by so I felt her support.

*Thank you, Eve.*

It wasn't difficult to find my way back up because the loud demands of Alpha Surge could lead anyone to his exact spot.

"This ship can't fit a fucking dragon!"

*"Raf's here,"* Eve hummed, sounding as relieved as I felt. There was a good chance that if he was in dragon form, it would complicate things if I didn't move my ass a bit faster. I had a good hunch Edwin was with him, or else this ship would have been set ablaze due to Raf's way of thinking.

In dragon form, there was very little control when it came to finding your designated target. It was simply burn everything down and hope whoever you were trying to save survived the chaos - a typical "fight first and ask questions later" response.

Having Edwin around would ensure he didn't forget the main purpose of their mission, which I only assumed was regrouping with me.

"Alpha Surge, you're not listening to me." I caught onto Grayson's voice. He sounded peeved with a dose of exhaustion attached, but you'd be a fool to not sense the slight urgency in his statement. "I need to talk to Alpha Maximus regarding Beta Eric. It's urgent."

"You ain't talking to anyone unless you go throu-"

"Oh, shut your trap hole, Surge," Richard bellowed in amusement. It sounded as if he'd just arrived at where they were standing. I was at the stairs that would lead to the deck, but I wanted to figure out what was so important that needed Max's attention.

"What's up, Grayson?"

"Alpha Rogue," Grayson greeted. "I'm going to assume Alexis is around?"

I smiled slightly at the idea he was asking about me before getting to the more important dilemma.

"Yes. Our Fallen Beauty is speaking with Alpha Maximus. I've already informed them of the commotion so she should be here shortly while Alpha Maximus requested to talk to Beta Eric. Probably for a report," he explained.

"There's a big problem," Grayson emphasized.

"With?" Alpha Surge snapped. "Listen, wizard boy, or whatever you are. Get to the point. We don't have time to deal with nonsense as the crew is already scouting the island for our departure!"

"You need to ditch Beta Eric ASAP!" Grayson revealed.

"Ditch Beta Eric?" Alpha Surge questioned before he actually chuckled. "You're speaking utter bullshit on this fine morning in the Void wasteland! Why don't you explain to Alpha Rogue why you believe his son should be ditched after serving Alpha Maximus for more than five years?"

Grayson had to have been as surprised as I was with the news Eric was related to Alpha Rogue. Richard was so joyous in nature but carried a level of wisdom and power that encouraged you to prove your worth while enjoying his company, but Eric gave off a controlling vibe immediately, almost as if he were pushing towards becoming an Alpha himself.

Obviously, I had beef with Eric, but even I could admit his potential was there. Only, it didn't feel like a "good" potential. Not in the slightest.

"Do you have anything against Eric that should be brought to our attention, Grayson? You're not one to cause trouble, so I'd love your input," Richard emphasized.

Grayson took a nervous breath and his voice dipped into pure seriousness.

"I witnessed Beta Eric's conversation with a group of feral wolves who pledged allegiance to the Dark Senator."

That had our attention. Alpha Surge didn't say a combative word, allowing Grayson - *or what I was beginning to assume was Grayson's wolf* - the privilege to continue.

"When we entered this wave, myself and two of Alexis's companions separated from her. We heard from the crewmen upon our dramatic arrival

that Beta Eric was supposed to retrieve me. That wasn't the case in the slightest. It's thanks to that dragon up there and his accomplice that we were able to track Alexis's scent to this very ship after a vigorous eight hours of trying to locate her."

"How did you find this information then?" Alpha Surge's voice was far lower now, which confirmed he wasn't taking this lightly.

"Just an hour ago, we'd witnessed a cloud of darkness which we had initially assumed was a void portal or trap. We sensed movement so I cloaked our presence in the air and requested the dragon to lower our altitude so we could land in a spot that didn't give us completely away. It was close enough to vividly watch a pack of tainted wolves come out of the void. Beta Eric and a strange woman with short white hair were the last to walk out of the space."

The silence only deepened; the tension in the air was charged. That was a bad sign, and I wanted to make my presence known, but this wasn't the right timing. Grayson had to at least finish what he'd started to explain.

"I'm not sure what Beta Eric's relationship status is, but he kissed the woman and explained that the ***Sword of Royale Flamme*** was the next artifact the Senator needed to retrieve, and that it was in this wave realm. That was the explanation for the walls of flames that were killing people mercilessly on the surface. The Senator wants the sword, as he also wants the ***Sword of Royale Givre***. I've never really heard of these artifacts or their significance, but Beta Eric vowed to retrieve them and said he would visit the Senator at a later time. He bowed and showed some symbol on his wrist that the woman also had, and he walked away while the woman and the wolves returned to the dark void. We waited until the void disappeared before moving again and tracked Beta Eric to the ship."

I took that moment to walk up the stairs, grabbing their attention as I walked over to where they stood. The top surface of the ship was indeed empty, and from the looks of it, we were anchored a bit off the south side of the island while six miniature boats were stationed on the shore.

From the earlier statement, the crew were definitely scouting the island or at least attempting to get an idea of how long it would take to venture through. With the waves, anything could happen at sea – meaning that one minute the waters could be present and the next, you'd be stuck in a dry oasis with whatever creatures were hidden in their depths .

We'd be far safer on land, but we had to figure out what the sword had to do with the Senator's interest.

"No need to catch me up. Continue," I urged as I reached them. None of them seemed to mind my obvious reveal that I'd been eavesdropping, but considering the importance of the situation, it was good I didn't need an explanation because time was of the essence.

Grayson looked relieved when I reached his right side, and I briefly looked up to see the circling dragon of striking red. I smiled at the twinkle of Raf's golden talons and the inner lining of his wings. His head lowered as if he sensed my attention before it lifted upward to release a stream of golden flames.

That was his way of saying that he was happy that I was safe.

I couldn't see Edwin, but he was probably somewhere on Raf's massive back. Returning my attention back to the three men, I noticed Grayson hadn't spoken anything more - his eyes clearly checking out my chest. As was Alpha Surge.

I flicked my hair purposely before crossing my arms beneath my breasts and arched an eyebrow at the two staring men.

"Last time someone stared so hard, they died." I voiced the comment with great sadness, which seemed to flick Alpha Surge and Grayson out of their staring state while Richard couldn't help but laugh.

"I wonder who the Alpha was to finish the deed," he joked with an added wink.

"It'll forever be a mystery," I concluded. "Unless anyone wants to sacrifice themselves now?"

Alpha Surge cleared his throat as he returned his gaze to Grayson. "We have someone on this ship who carries the Sword of Royale Givre. If the Sword of Royale Flamme is near, that's bad."

"Why?" I asked. Richard crossed his arms over his chest as he briefly closed his eyes while he explained. "The two swords are the complete opposite, meaning there'll be utter chaos if they're in the same vicinity. These swords aren't ordinary. They're two of the most powerful artifacts in their league, and there are only five swords in the supernatural world."

"Five," I whispered.

"Fire, ice, air, dark, and light," Alpha Surge revealed. "Originally there were thirteen."

"How did it go from thirteen to five?" I couldn't help but ask. I've never heard of any of these stories of the legendary swords.

"Selfish supernaturals and humans," Richard answered with a deep frown. "They were hunted and destroyed after the Purge Revolution that occurred centuries ago. The five remaining swords had been used to seal the chaos that was awakening from the selfishness of the user of the sword that was designated to darkness. Many say these waves and Void Mastery was a world sealed off by the five brave sword wielders who then sacrificed their lives to ensure the generations of shifters would live. Their sacrifice was mourned by the human and supernatural worlds, which created the peace treaty that declared that all the remaining swords would be destroyed. The five sacrificed swords had vanished with their owners, but since the waves and the expeditions through the Void Mastery, rumors have circulated that the swords have begun to show up."

"So the Ice one...the Sword of Royale Givre, has been discovered?"

"Yes," Alpha Surge declared. "As has the Sword of Royale Lumière. It's currently held by a Kitsune shifter."

**"Kitsune. An extremely rare breed,"** Eve noted.

*Agreed. I didn't know they existed in the supernatural world.*

"Can anyone hold the sword?" I asked.

"Not just anyone," Alpha Surge stressed. "Royals only."

"So doesn't that mean the Dark Senator was once a royal before he went all diabolical and power-hungry?"

Richard nodded, but his eyes darkened suddenly while the air seemed to tense a few notches. From the look on his face and Alpha Surge's the conversation was over. Grayson and I moved our attention behind us to see Beta Eric literally storming towards us.

*And he looked pissed.*

"You fucking cunt-" he began with every intention of hurting me. I didn't move in the slightest, my arms still crossed. I noticed Grayson stiffen while Richard, and surprisingly Alpha Surge, moved to my sides in a blur of movement.

**"Eric."** Richard's voice was rock-hard with authority, but Beta Eric was still heading full speed my way. The slight chill in the air encouraged me to grin as goosebumps crept along my flesh.

Instead of Alpha Surge and Richard moving in front of me, they moved a few feet away as Grayson cursed and literally jumped off to my far right. Their fleeting jolts of movement didn't register in Eric's tunnel vision because he was three steps from what I assumed was a punch in the face.

His arm lifted up and pushed forward, only for a sword of black to dart right into his flesh. He screamed while his feet halted in place, but his eyes finally acknowledged what was behind me - *forcing everyone to acknowledge the deadly force that hovered protectively around my calm stance.*

The lull in the air was so tense, I was sure some would be collapsing from the lack of air, but I'd missed this sensation from the days of my long training sessions.

The sudden slam to our right forced us to acknowledge the large mass that had landed - *and splintered the planks of the ship.* It didn't bother the rising 8'0" shifter with his tattooed muscles that were glowing vibrantly with

golden magic as his massive wings extended to their full length.

One look at his murderous face made me grin in greeting.

"Hey, Raf. Do you mindcalming Edwin down before the shadow apocalypse descends upon the Void and kills us all?"

I could do it, but frankly, Raf was so much better at it.

Eric hissed as the sword that had practically ruined his right palm retracted, forcing him to take a few steps back before he fell on his ass while clenching his injured hand that was struggling to heal.

"That depends, Your Majesty." Raf's voice vibrated with a foreign sound that confirmed his dragon was in complete control. "Neither of us have spilled enough blood to justify redemption."

*Uh oh.*

"Your Majesty?" Grayson questioned. The poor guy was looking between Edwin's Dark Fae form, Raf's massive hybrid form, and me - *or my imprinted mark.*

Richard and Alpha Surge were basically sitting ducks, because they simply couldn't get any closer.

"You spilled a little?" I suggested and gestured to the pool of blood coming from Eric's hand.

"Why the fuck am I not healing?!" he snapped, which brought our attention to him as he watched his trembling hand as it began to taint to black like his very flesh was rotting.

"You don't know about the dangers of Shadow Fae?" I asked out of genuine curiosity. "Jeez. You're working for the dark side and yet you still don't know shit."

His eyes were filled with threatening rage as they met mine - those orbs of evergreen shifting to a blazing gold that confirmed his wolf was going to strike.

I didn't realize Edwin would react to the disrespectful glare, but he did, suddenly before Eric with his sword raised in a blink.



"Oh shit!" I cursed instead of stalling Edwin's move.

The sound of clashing swords sent out an aftershock wave so strong, we all went flying. My body crashed into Raf's, and he caught me with ease. The loud splash from behind had to be Grayson, because Richard managed to stop himself from falling over the edge and was holding Alpha Surge with him.

"Raf, get Grayson," I ordered while taking in the scene. Edwin's sword of black was against a sword of glimmering blue that was encased with thick ice. I wasn't necessarily shocked that Alpha Maximus had interfered, but his threatening aura would only provoke my first-in-command and we couldn't deal with that catastrophe right now.

*No way did I have the energy or magic to deal with taming the chaos of the battle that would ensue.*

"I can stop him," Raf noted, but I shook my head. I could handle things, but it would just be annoying.

"Grayson can't swim."

That got Raf muttering before he let go of me and pushed off the ground to dive towards the waters to retrieve Grayson. This was my chance to bring this down a few notches.

Generally speaking, I didn't care about Eric dying in the crossfire, but this newly-created bond was making my heart thrum like an anxious kitten stuck in the highest tree in the world at the idea of Max getting hurt.

*Bothersome connections.*

They pushed back from each other, giving Max the opportunity to move swiftly in front of Eric, who was dragging his trembling self back.

*Wrong move.*

Bolts of black shot out unexpectedly, missing Max by a mere centimeter but enjoying some claim of agony by striking Eric's right side entirely. He screamed like a goat being slain for dinner, and I cringed because the smell of burnt flesh hit my nose almost immediately.

*Maeve! Crown, please!*

***"Done. Go!"*** Eve ordered immediately.

I moved in a blur movement and was in front of Max in a heartbeat. I felt the surge of protectiveness instantly, but the tattoo on my right arm blared to life as I envisioned the pink image of the running wolf tainted to black.

Edwin moved forward, but his sword stopped inches from my face - seconds before bolts of pink came from the very sky and crashed all around him like an electric jail.

That forced Edwin to still, giving me a moment to take in his 8"0' height of deadly shadows. Edwin looked nothing like my first-in-command in "human" form.

Here, he stood with a voluminous body of shadows that looked as if he wore a cloak of darkness that flickered with hints of red.

A crown of pitch black with red jewels sat upon what would be assumed was his head while his "eyes" were non-existent until he opened them to reveal blaring hollows of red that glowed with enough intensity to make the average person beg for mercy.

He reminded me of what cartoons liked to portray the devil looked like - a black-cloaked being with threatening eyes of red and an aura that could plague a nation.

My senses told me Max was going to move - to try to take advantage of the situation - but I lifted my hand to signal him to stop while my eyes remained on Edwin's red ones.

Seeing as Raf wasn't back, I only could assume he was hiding Grayson from seeing what I was about to do. I didn't care about Alpha Surge or Richard, honestly, and Eric was on the chopping block anyway.

I didn't know what Maximus would think after witnessing this, but I guess it didn't matter because this was going to be an unavoidable circumstance that had to be dealt with here and now.

*Guess this will be royal practice.*

The mere gasps were confirmation that I'd unlocked the tiny cap of

authority I kept hidden for a good fucking reason. The energetic force flooded through me far too quickly. I had to work overtime to recap it, but I'd taken a bit too much for my comfort and would need to allow it to surge outward anywhere else but around me.

The sky boomed with thunder that shook the very waters as pink lightning darted through the suddenly dark sky full of grey clouds.

Edwin still hadn't lowered his sword as the wind picked up around the three of us. It blew my pink strands that were now the same length as Maximus's white strands. I felt the heaviness of the crown that I'd kept hidden for so long that I'd honestly forgotten it sat upon my fated head.

I now wore a dress, one of pink that shifted to literal flames at the bottom half. The front side dipped at my cleavage which allowed him - *or anyone, for that matter* - to see the newly imprinted mark upon my flesh.

My skin had to look tanner because of the shining markings across my flesh, and my lips were still cloaked with my dark plum lipstick, even though they tingled with enough power to make tiny pink sparks flicker on and off from my bottom lip.

My eyes slightly drifted over to see Alpha Surge was forced to his knees, and Richard was struggling not to bend to the same power that was trying to tame everyone in my space. I even felt the slight tremble in Max's frame from behind me, which I had to admit was rather impressive seeing as he was the closest one to me other than Edwin.

The power oozing out of me was a mere glimpse of the energy I'd been given the day of my crowning, but I'd been warned to never use it because I was a novice who had to be trained to fill these heels of domination.

*A stupid mistake because of how those of high rank underestimated me. Maybe if I'd done so back then, we'd have more survivors. Better yet, maybe our kingdom would still be in our hidden sanctuary.*

Arching my eyebrow as my eyes met those red hollows, I tilted my head to the side.

"Are you really going to make me waste more energy?" My voice was nothing like usual. It was filled with a commanding gravity that made the very ship tremble upon the wild, swaying waters.

It took a few seconds, but he pulled back his sword. However, his energy was still ticking me off.

"Switch back to your human form," I ordered. He remained in place, his red eyes drifting past us to his prey.

With a single step forward, the tall frame of darkness was forced to his knees, his body trembling as if I'd whipped him furiously.

Reaching out so my single finger stroked his inky chin, I smiled with threatening grace.

"Do not make me repeat myself, or there *will* be consequences."

Deep, deep down, my threat was as empty as my patience, because I really disliked the idea of hurting Edwin, even in this form, but when Shadow Fae lost their sense of humanity, you had to reel them in by force or the rest of the world suffered.

*We did not have time for that right now.*

He made an eerie noise in reply, bowing all the way down as if to apologize. I wanted to dismiss his pleading move, but I tsked and moved my hand to stroke his left temple since his crown would probably slice my entire hand off if I tried to stroke his head.

"You are forgiven because of your immense protectiveness of me, but remember the man behind me. He's my mate and any harm to him will inflict pain on me."

"WRAEEE." His eerie thankfulness made me pull back my energy a few notches, but I wouldn't completely retreat until he shifted back to my calm Edwin who wouldn't destroy the Void as we knew it.

"You're excused," I concluded, and his form began to shrink until Edwin's naked frame was knelt down before me. He fought for breath, his skin still sizzling with black marks as the remaining flow of magic sought safety

within his flesh.

Once I knew he wouldn't switch back, I swiftly opened that cap and reversed the flow of energy back into it. The motion was a bit more sluggish, but Eve stepped in to speed up the process.

By the time it was all done, I was back in my previous attire with my short hair and crown hidden from sight once more. Raf soared into view with a drenched Grayson in his grasp, just as the clouds began to part - allowing the sunlight to peer through.

The waves were calming, which helped the ship become more stable, and I caught onto Richard offering a hand to Alpha Surge. I was pretty grateful none of the crew or armed men were around or they may have died by accident.

Taking a quick glance at Edwin to make sure he was alright, I shifted my stance to turn around, my eyes briefly looking up to see what Maximus's reaction would be.

Surprisingly enough, he was completely calm as he looked down at me in return. His sword of ice that carried a blue illumination around it was still in his possession, but I didn't think he worried about the chance that I would attack him.

I felt the slight twinkle of worry that was clearly aimed at me, but seeing as I was still on my feet, he tamed his emotions further and gave me a slight nod of encouragement. The motion somewhat gave me the strength to keep standing, even though my body wished to shut down and sleep for a damn week or two.

We weren't out of the woods yet, because a certain tantrum shifter was still breathing - something I personally disliked. If anyone tried to harm me, I simply ended their misery by killing them, but I figured out the only reason why was he was still alive.

Either Max had extreme pain tolerance, or he was good at zoning out a specific pack member's pain because Eric looked like a half-burnt zombie.

Shadow Edwin, as I liked to call him, was merciless in that form, and his strikes usually killed. But I guess this man had some saving grace in him because he was attempting to manage the excruciating pain.

"What did you do to me?" he snarled specifically my way. "I can't heal! Why can't I heal?! Why are you just standing there, Alpha? Why do you believe whatever nonsense she told you?!"

"And what nonsense would that be?" I muttered in exhaustion. "Last time I checked, all we did was sleep, fuck, and imprint one another. Oh, and Alpha Maximus gave me a position as a Death Expeditioner!" I wasn't sure why that actually excited me, but it did - *even though nothing was actually official, like at all.*

"What kind of Alpha would I be if I made you work?" Max casually muttered, which drew my attention as I lifted my gaze to him.

I think everyone else was still registering what I just said, giving me a chance to combat his reply. "I'm not going to be some damsel in distress who sits at home in the pack house, reading fashion magazines and keeping up with whatever senseless drama show is popular these days," I voiced.

He pouted, but I felt like he understood my point.

*Maybe.*

"We'll talk about it later," he concluded.

"Meaning, we **will** talk about it later because I ain't no Stay-At-Home Luna."

"Your sass is going to be a problem," he commented, but again, he didn't seem too bothered by my combativeness.

"Deep down you like it," I purred, which captivated his attention as we enjoyed a moment of staring at one another.

***"The evil villain is going to die from your guys' sappy romance,"*** Eve dryly noted, sounding like she was bored out of her mind by our random flirting moment in the midst of battle.

*Wouldn't that be convenient?*

"ANSWER ME!" Eric screamed and suddenly I was in Max's grasp, because the entire ship was crumbling like broken shards of glass.

"Fuck!" Raf cursed and somehow managed to grab Grayson before shooting outward and catching Edwin before he hit the waters' surface. Max only needed to hold me with one hand while he shot his arm upward.

**"FROZEVA!"** The simple command made the waters beneath us freeze until we landed on a block of thick ice. I looked back to see Alpha Surge and Richard were included, but the two of them were already running toward us.

I turned my attention back to Eric, watching as he sat on a piece of wood that was moving in the opposite direction. The anger on his face could kill, and from the blurred movement of his hand reaching for something around his neck, I had a strong feeling he had something up his sleeve none of us were expecting.

**"Enough of this, Eric!"** Richard commanded. The demand even made my skin crawl at the intensity of his Alpha power. I wasn't going to count on the command to make him stop, my scorching magic already working towards the web of a spell that could at least protect us.

"ALPHA!" For a brief second, our attention moved to see the crew on their ships in desperation to reach us. It was obviously the distraction Eric needed, because when I turned back I noticed the sinister grin that formed on his lips.

*That smile he'd carried upon his lips as he walked away and left me in a world of dismay.*

"Max! Snowflake path!" I ordered and leapt before he could respond. He had to have caught a mere glimpse of the idea unfolding within my mind because he moved flawlessly as I was racing across the water thanks to the snowflake platforms he was creating just as fast.

"This is your punishment for believing a fucking cunt, Alpha!" Eric screamed and tugged on the necklace to break it apart. The move ignited a volcanic burst of dark energy - leaving me no choice but to push off the

snowflake platform I'd landed on to soar through the air into the path of the crew and knights.

I began to flip my body in the air, so my back now faced the helpless group of men on their boat while I got the upside-down view of Eric as he launched his attack.

**"DELORUSO DARKANDA!"** My heart stopped at the spell that immediately triggered the memory of one of the five forbidden magic books I'd been encouraged to devour. It wasn't so I could use the spells the harm, but so I would know how to counter them if they were ever used against our kingdom.

The counter-spell left my lips before I could register it.

**"FLAMMERUSO LIGHTANDA!"** I screamed, and didn't hesitate to uncap that same vial of power - only there was no time to tame the power. I let that one vial pour out every drop of fiery horsepower, and I watched as the threads of magic wound up into a blast of flames that formed a gigantic wolf that crashed into an inky black wolf of the same mammoth size.

The impact didn't just trigger an aftershock or wave; it sent a burst of wind that reminded me of a cyclone. It had me flying so swiftly back that if I hit the waters' surface, I'd surely break a bone or two.

"ALEXIS!" Grayson screamed, but it was Max's voice that pierced through the air with menace.

**"ECHO! CATCH HER!"**

My concentration wasn't on the fact I was about to probably crash into unconsciousness, but on maintaining the spell long enough for Edwin to finish the one he'd been conjuring without anyone's notice. Suddenly, my body was caught by something like a sheet in the form of a kite that was strong enough to catch me and not send me flying back.

Whatever was being said was drowned out by the growling snuffles between the two elemental wolves fighting to protect the crew. I caught a glimpse of Max's voice ordering the crew and knights to get back to land.



I was sure he was making a faster route for them now that I held off Eric, but his move truly made me realize just how tainted he was because this type of magic wasn't just for the average wolf shifter.

*This demonic magic could only be used if you'd sold your soul to a Ruler of the Dark Arts.*

"You shouldn't be this fucking strong!" he screamed at the top of his lungs. "I broke you! You should have been useless!"

If my teeth weren't gritted together as I began to move my hands around in a hypnotic manner, I would have answered immediately, but my patience was again running thin, and if I wasn't careful, I'd have no choice but to use my wildcard.

"You broke me first, yes. You knew nothing of me other than the reality that we were on different sides. However, even with the future of us being together...the potential future of us sitting upon the same throne, you tossed that all away for your selfish desires. Whatever they were, they somehow offered me redemption, and here I am!" I tossed back as my hands began to shake violently while magic circles of teal began to form on the palms of my hands and move in a clockwise motion.

The temptation to check on the others was making it hard to concentrate, but I allowed his words to contribute to the pleasure of taunting him further, hoping to distract his focus for just a split second.

"You broke me first, so what made you think I wouldn't break you back?" I exclaimed over the drumming chaos. "Are you mad that I've snuck out of nowhere and taken everything you care about? You didn't expect that, did you? Why not show your true colors or, better yet, brag about how you rejected me!"

He screamed. It looked like half of his body was melting from the excruciating heat while the other side was being tainted with purple symbols.

His magic was withering, and that was when I decided to push my luck.

"NOW, EDWIN!" I screamed loud and clear.

Eric's eyes widened before he looked up to see Edwin. My Dark Fae was holding a red bow of illuminating blood in one grasp with an inky black arrow pointing directly at Eric.

He let go at that very second, and the release was so fast, Eric was already screaming at the strike of the arrow that stabbed his eye.

His wolf of forbidden shadows burst out of control, and I gasped while Grayson cast a spell.

**"PROTECTANDA!"** Walls of teal spiked from the waters and created a large enough cube to contain Eric's uncontrollable outburst, protecting all of us as Raf flew towards Edwin to catch him when his energy cut out.

He moved out of the way just in time as sparks of black began to electrocute the protective cube, causing Grayson to curse.

"GET TO SHORE!" He was specifically telling me, but I wasn't really going anywhere with this Echo holding me in place - *whatever it was*. Even if I wished to flee at this point, I wouldn't dare do it.

*I'm not a fucking coward.*

The electric shocks were out of control and working overtime to destroy the cube fortress. My teeth gritted together as I braced for the explosion that was inevitably approaching. Suddenly, my vision was blocked by a figure I wasn't expecting.

"Alpha Surge?!" I exclaimed. I wanted to push him out of the way, but he moved his hands swiftly, creating various symbols that ignited magic circle after magic circle of various colors.

The presence behind Echo's protective sheet body and me suddenly relaxed me like I'd fallen into the arms of an angel. I looked up to see Alpha Maximus was back. He and Alpha Surge were managing to stay in the air thanks to the tall pillars of ice beneath their feet.

"Anytime, Richard!" Alpha Surge snapped. He finished the final magic circle and executed the spell as he pushed his hands outward. **"Capture and exorcise the forbidden!"**

My eyes grew wide in actual shock because he didn't need any spell after to push the deed into fruition. The circles of magic pushed outward to try to create a dome over the shattering cube.

That was when I caught onto Richard as he raced across the chaotic ocean waves, moving swiftly while carrying a huge hammer that sparked with teal and green energy.

The fierce wind picked up at his approach, forcing Max to grab ahold of me. His arm hooked around my waist to secure us.

"You betrayed me, Father!" Eric screamed, again and again, the sound beginning to amplify as the cube disintegrated and more charges of black elemental lightning sparks fought for freedom from the second line of defense. "How dare you all? How dare you pick her over me?!"

It was hard to truly follow his mental process, especially when he'd been the culprit of his demise by assuming I'd said a thing. I bet whatever Max had confronted him with was just the icing on the cake, but our sexual diversion must have put him in some state of frustration before the shift to fear that he was "caught".

*Now he'd either lose his life or his sanity.*

For a split second, my heart ached slightly at the idea of his end, but then it just confirmed that I was never a priority to him as a mate. His purpose was to get rid of the ultimate threat, which was me and my kingdom.

He'd only let me go because I wasn't a threat back then.

*Here I was, a threat to his existence now that I'd found individuals to back me up without trying.*

"Maximus! Break the bond!" Alpha Surge ordered in haste.

Max took a deep inhale as he tightened his hold on me as if he needed the support before I felt the tense stain of his frame.

Eric's words were cut off by mangled screams of agony. I could imagine him gripping his head and fighting against the abrupt destruction of his connection to Alpha Maximus and the pack.

Being kicked out of a pack and forced into Omegahood was probably the most disgraceful type of removal a wolf shifter of any kind could experience, and if he didn't perish here and now, he may be even more dangerous as a feral wolf.

Eric let out a final cry, activating an outburst that destroyed the cube and somehow managed to crack through Alpha Surge's protective force.

"Shit! Fall back, Richard!" Alpha Surge ordered, but he was far too close to retreat now as he lifted his hammer.

**"AS THE ALPHA OF ROGUE PACK, YOU ARE BANISHED AND EXILED FROM ANY ALLIANCES!"** he screamed and pushed off the ground to make his attack.

"Maximus!" Alpha Surge urged, but Max was clearly struggling to recover from the severing of the bond.

"Echo!" I declared and pointed at Richard. ***"Protect Richard!"***

It was the only thing I could think of and a spark of hope darted through me as the sheet of black that caught me formed a ball and shot like an asteroid about to crash into the water's surface.

With a blink, it reached Richard in time and wrapped its protective sheet of black around him while he lowered the hammer in the ultimate attack.

Alpha Surge cursed and lifted his arms to the sides to create a protective orb around us, in time for the explosion that blinded all of us with green-blue light. My eyes were forced to close, and I only opened them when I couldn't feel the intense heat and see the bright, shining force against the back of my lids.

My first instinct was to find Richard. It took a hot minute, but my eyes landed on the ball of black floating upon the waters away from the site of destruction. Then I turned my attention to where Eric had been, waiting for the thick smoke to clear.

***"ALEXANDRA! BACK SEAT!"*** Eve's sudden declaration put all my senses into overdrive as I pulled right out of Max's hold, took a step around

Alpha Surge, and pushed him into Max with enough force to send them both off the pillars of ice towards the ocean. I allowed Eve to take the driver's seat in time to push off the slippery surface, spin in the air, and raise our left leg to stop the ball of cracking shadow that would have obliterated all three of us.

A scream escaped our throat as we kicked the plagued ball to the far left. I heard the sound of my ankle cracking as pain shot through me in a rush, but I numbed it all as Eve's attention moved to the culprit of the lethal attack.

My eyes locked onto a pair of golden ones. I noticed the pure white hair that was long and fluttering wildly with the wind that had whiplashed her from the crash.

Her eyes were voids of emotion, but for a split second, I could see the immense hate that was targeted at us while our body began to descend. Maeve pulled back but my eyes didn't leave hers as she began to fade. I only tugged my eyes away to confirm that she'd not only protected the unconscious Eric from the catastrophic attack but was stealing him away with her.

She had to be the one Grayson had been talking about, but from her energy levels, we wouldn't stand a chance taking her on, and I frankly was done using any more power when we still couldn't determine when this wave would end.

She disappeared in twinkles of black orbs. My body grew rigid with the approach of the waters, but arms caught me before I crashed.

"Got you." Rafael's soft voice made me smile as I looked up to see his relieved face. "What mischief have we just wrapped ourselves in?"

"A vengeful one," I quietly commented. "But maybe we've just brought upon an alliance?"

He noticed the glimmer of hope in my eyes, and his sad smile spread out further to acknowledge his loyalty regarding the idea. "We'll follow you wherever you want to go."

"Good," I stated with a sigh. "But I don't think I can really go anywhere

with a broken ankle."

He pouted his lips and easily hooked an arm around my waist to hold me securely before dropping further down to the ball of black.

"Wolf healing isn't gonna save you with this one," he noted as he reached the orb of protection. He had a point. Forbidden magic had lingering effects - one of which was fucking over natural healing at any type of speed, which included wolf shifter healing. We'd have to get out of the area to speed the process, but who knew how we'd do that with so much dark energy vibrating through the air. With how strong and thick the air was, if any of us switched into wolf form or any supernatural form, there would be consequences, like the risk of losing our minds to the darkness.

"What is that thing?" Raf asked.

"Oh." I had to blink out the hazy fog in my mind and attempted to stay "present". My exhaustion was creeping in, and if I didn't just crash, I'd be fucked for a few hours.

*Time I really didn't think we had to spare.*

"Echo?" I said it like a question because I wasn't sure if it would listen to me. "You can let go of Richard now. We'll bring him to safety."

There was a poof sound before the protective orb began to shrink and lift upward - releasing Richard, who was crossed-legged on a patch of ice - *the platform probably created by Max somehow*. He looked completely unsatisfied and from the vibrations of his striking aura, he wasn't pleased in the slightest, but the sight of me gave him a bit of relief before he frowned.

"Sorry to say this, Your Majesty," he began with a knowledgeable pout. "But you look horrendous."

"My plan for vengeance against your son, who, by the way, rejected me five years ago, didn't go too well, seeing as he somehow managed to become some OP bastard like in one of those classic games and escaped with help."

I felt like the whole "escape" part didn't seem to bother them in comparison to the news that Eric was the culprit to my rejected status.

"Eric was the one who rejected you in the castle?" Raf went from astonished to pissed off in two blinks. "We should have killed him."

"I agree with you," I muttered and sighed. "However, my intention wasn't to kill him. Disable him, sure, but murder isn't fun without torturous intent."

"Which sounds a whole lot worse," Richard said with a weak chuckle. "This is going to be a pain to explain to the pack, my Luna, and Erika."

"Didn't think my dirty laundry would have fucked shit up. My apologies," I confessed.

He shook his head. "We've been looking into Eric's behavior for months, my dear. All your sudden arrival did was speed everything the fuck up. I'm assuming you didn't want to kill him out of respect for me?"

"You're his father. Though I'm unsure if the rules still apply, betrayal is far more degrading to the family pack than it is to the pack that holds the shifter accountable. I'd hoped you'd be able to tackle everything in the limelight without the dose of mystery and unnecessary gossip, but with his escape, that's inevitable now."

He sighed and slowly worked on rising up and balancing himself on the ice platform as Raf further spread his wings to keep us afloat while he straightened himself. The ball of black was small enough to fit the palm of one's hand, and I couldn't help but reach out with my palm to gesture for it to land in my grasp.

It did exactly that, the touch of its body warm and comforting.

"Thanks, Echo," I whispered as I admired its odd body of black. It really just looked like a ball of shadows, but I could feel its swift heartbeat.

"It looks like if we want to survive the remainder of this wave, we'll have to form an alliance," Richard concluded and stared specifically at me. "That will also mean I need to know exactly what Eric did."

"It's simple." I shrugged slightly, forgetting how heavy my body felt, even though Raf was clearly holding my entire weight. "I became a Rejected Queen who lost her kingdom at the hands of the Dark Senator with his

accomplices. One of which was your son, Eric Rogue."

Richard looked disappointed, but the emotion faded as seriousness took its place.

"Then I guess I can safely say," he began and I watched him bow to one of his knees, "that it's an honor to meet the sole individual our kind thought we lost."

Lifting his head, he slightly smiled.

"Good to see you're alive, Queen Alexandra Wolf."

*Would an alliance be what we needed to survive until we finally got back to the surface?*





## SURVIVAL THE OLDFASHIONED WAY

"We won't be able to shift, sir, so I suggest we take the long route until the surface wave arrives," one of the armed knights declared and raised his arm up in salute. "We've secured the area briefly while we regroup and attend to injuries."

"We lost most of the base resources in the ship, but I can create a shelter if need be," Alpha Maximus concluded as he observed the temporary camps made for a brief rest. "Get everyone prepped to depart. I wouldn't be surprised if the enemy tries to send reinforcements to this exact spot, especially if they have a good Expeditioner handy."

"Yes, Alpha! I'll get that done promptly." The knight bowed before he turned his stance slightly and bowed in my direction. "T-Thank you, miss, for your protection! We would have been dead without your assistance."

"I'm sure Alpha Maximus would have done something," I reasoned with a tired smile. "Please, just call me Alexis."

"T-Thank you, Alexis," he replied and further bowed before he was up and running across the sandy surface to do his duties in prep for our departure.

We'd been sitting on the shore for fifteen minutes thus far, and things were already in motion. Raf was in the air in his half-dragon form, while Edwin was the only one who could shift without being influenced by the

heavy, tainted energy in the air. He was making a quick scout of the area and would confirm which direction would be the best for us to head to, to avoid any other confrontations. Grayson was going around making sure everyone was in good shape, leaving me with Max.

Richard and Alpha Surge were having a private conversation, and I was sure it was about the alliance and the actions of Eric. I bet it was hurting Richard a lot more than he was revealing, but until we got to the surface once more, there was nothing much he or any of us could do.

There were no resources here that aided us in communicating with the surface world, and until this world was developed in some way, it would always be a land infested with various dangers that could either empower you or kill you.

One thing I had noticed was Grayson was clearly avoiding me, but I wasn't even going to bother worrying about that right now. If I gave him the benefit of the doubt, maybe I could hope we could talk about this sudden change in, well...everything.

*Does he think he's the only one trying to adjust to change? We woke up after blissful, heart-pumping sex to murderous waves, infiltrated a royal expedition by accident in the middle of an investigation gone ugly, and wound up in a full, intense showdown that took seven of us just to survive. He shouldn't be avoiding me over me accidentally mating with a man I'd just met. Hmm...does that make me a whore?*

**"You can't be a whore when it comes to fate,"** Eve muttered with a sleepy voice. She was barely there, and I didn't blame her because fuck, I'd be a dead log in the realms of sleep if my anxiety would allow it.

*He's mad.*

**"And you care because?"**

*I don't want us to lose our friendship over...well, this.*

**"You're the one with a broken ankle that he's probably aware of and yet he's waltzing around this shore like a damn war medic attending the**

***healthy instead of the injured,***" Eve complained.

She did have a point.

Something chilled pressed softly against my forehead, tugging me out of my mental conversation and revealing a crouching Max, who calmly stared at me. I blinked a few times before reaching up to retrieve the bottle of water in his grasp.

"Where did you get this from?" I inquired.

"I always let the crew bring empty bottles of water on any expedition. It's easier to fill the bottles with ice and speed the melting process to ensure fresh water than braving the dangers of these waters and foods in the Void Mastery," he explained.

"I...don't need it," I tried to refuse, but my throat was parched and I really did need something in my system, even if it was just a drink.

"You're going to pass out and be useless if you don't drink something," he argued. "I don't want your men murdering me."

"Men?" I pouted. "You mean Edwin, Raf, and Grayson? Comrades, yes. They wouldn't murder you though."

His arched eyebrow said otherwise, but he was clearly going to stay crouched there giving me a heavy stare until I did what he asked.

With a huff, I looked away for a moment and muttered, "You can't make me."

The trickle of amusement that went through my body forced me to return my eyes to him and see the tempting lift on his lips that wished to defy my very words. I never knew I could take the cap off a bottle so fast, but it was gone along with half of the chilled water I chugged in one go.

I gasped and shivered at the sudden surge of cold that shot up into my brain.

"Fuck! Brain freeze! Can I even get brain freezes with water? Ow! Ah."

***"This is what you get for making yourself look like a damn fool,"*** Eve concluded.

The snicker caught my attention as I froze in my moment of dismay - seconds before Max began to chuckle while he shook his head.

"I shouldn't laugh, but seeing you flustered is far more amusing than teasing my sister," he confessed.

That made me pout before I literally tossed the remainder of water in his face.

Now I got everyone's damn attention as Max blinked to see my pouting expression with my narrowed eyes.

*And he fucking lost it.*

He was laughing even harder as he patted his chest.

"Does my mate have a temper?" he teased through chuckles and looked at me like he was thinking of all the fucked-up shit he could do to piss me off.

"Dammit! You're supposed to get mad!" I huffed and tried to reach out to punch that broad chest of his, but my immobility was seriously my greatest enemy right now because I couldn't do shit. "Fuck! Move closer!"

He purposely sat back on his ass as he pointed and laughed at me.

"UGH!" I grunted as my cheeks flushed. "Go away!"

That triggered more laughter from him until he literally had tears running down his face. "Surely, Your Majesty. I'll kindly dismiss myself for the sake of your flustered pride," he teased.

At this point, I gave up and waited for him to calm the fuck down. I didn't remember anyone who'd teased this way since my little brother, and though I'd admit it was frustrating on the surface, I felt differently inside.

*How did this make me feel?*

It was hard to decipher an emotion you hadn't experienced for such a long time. A mix of embarrassment with a pinch of happiness?

Just having his attention was lifting up my spirits, even though I felt like a car had crashed into me, thrown my brittle body into the air, and waited until I fell to the ground to try to reverse.

*I'd be dead in such an analogy, but Moon Goddess knew my body needed*

*a damn break.*

I wasn't sure if I'd get one, especially with so much time left before we'd be able to return to the surface. Staring at my tattoo in its still half position was pissing me off, so I stopped checking, but it was clear to me that we'd have to protect ourselves. This wave surely held something important for so many people to be within it.

In previous waves, I'd normally be alone with Edwin, or see a maximum of ten people if I was lucky. Longer duration waves would have a few more people, but having a miniature army with us confirmed that treasure was hidden in these voided parts and someone wanted to claim as much as they could.

*No matter the cost of anyone's life.*

The tender touch to my forehead brought my eyes back to those wonderful snowflake ones - a wave of compassion and curiosity tossing around like a cycled washer.

"Why do you feel the way you feel?" His voice was as low as it could be, as if to preserve my privacy as it still felt like the world was watching us. I bet he struggled to figure out exactly what I was feeling, and frankly, it was honestly weird to accept the reality that he knew exactly how I felt.

I wasn't in his pack, where he was the Alpha in control and could sense every bit of my whirlwind of emotions, but I guessed with a tangled past of rejection, I never really absorbed what benefits came with being mated to someone.

"I've...never really experienced being teased like this before," I admitted. "Not since I lost my younger brother. Everyone's normally serious around me, respectful, and well...even now there's just a limit to how most people treat me...but I've barely known you for twenty-four hours and though you have an expression of emotionless boredom, you laughed like I'd told you the funniest joke ever."

His eyes further softened at my admission, and what surprised me was the

sudden move of pressing his lips to my forehead. Was anyone breathing at this point? *Was I even breathing?* The lull in the air made me wonder if everyone else thought they were witnessing a hallucination.

"My mother always told me if you don't experience something enough, you should cherish it even more with a sense of gratification," he whispered. "That way, the Universe will have no choice but to bring you more."

Those wise words reminded me of the countless ones my parents would give me from time to time when they were alive. It was amazing how it was only a few years ago where I'd groan and roll my eyes at those words of wisdom, and now I wished to hear them even one more time.

"Sorry for laughing," he finally apologized. "It's been a rather long time since I've expressed emotion, let alone laughed unless I'm around my family or close packmates."

"Is that why everyone's looking at us like we grew three heads each?" I concluded. Even Grayson, who I picked out of the crowd, was clearly looking our way, and I could have sworn I caught a glimpse of jealousy inching into his expression.

***"Now he remembers he had a woman. Hmph. Useless,"*** Eve grumbled and I felt like she'd snuggled up and gave up trying to stay awake any longer.

"Sort of. Me showing emotions and talking normally causes catastrophes," he admitted and rested his hands on his knees as he continued to sit on his ass in front of me. "You don't look well at all."

I gave him an appreciative grin at his analysis of me.

"I function on naps, and I seriously need one. I didn't think before I acted earlier. It's gonna take me a while for my vials to fill."

"Vials?" he curiously asked.

"Hmm. That's the way I try to filter my magic. Some use stars within their subconscious or something simple."

"Beer bottles," he answered, and I couldn't help but give him a judgemental *'what'* look. "My brothers and father like to drink beer. They're

older than I am, so I had to deal with not being able to drink while they all could. My bros like to tease me about it, so I couldn't wait to be able to reach the age when I could drink beer. Since I was being trained in the realms of royal power, I decided beer bottles was a good container of power."

"That's kind of cute," I complimented as my smile widened. "You're good at holding a conversation."

"You're intriguing to talk to," he replied right back. "I don't like to talk much."

"I know," I hummed as we shared a look.

"And then they kissed and lived happily ever after." The toneless voice came from my right, and I looked over to see two individuals standing in armor I knew without a doubt was from royal heritage.

"You should at least seem excited that our Alpha has conjured up enough warmth in his heart to attempt to flirt, Yukikyo."

My eyes landed on the fierce woman on the right. She had flawless skin, the sight immediately reminding me of Korean models because they always had the softest-looking complexions.

She did have some Korean qualities, though she didn't seem entirely of Korean descent. Maybe a mix? I wouldn't know, but she was simply beautiful to look at. Her sleek hair was in a bun, the black roots transitioning to various pastel colors that got lost in the wrapped-up bun that was neatly set to not get in her way.

She had to be 5'7" from my swift observation and since she wore flat combat boots she was clearly taller than me. Her armor was navy blue with white steel accessories and armor plates.

Her eyes were captivating because one eye was onyx while the other was prism-like. I witnessed the beam of rainbow colors that shone out of a clear triangle.

From the name, I could only assume this was Beta Yuki.

The man to her right was the same height as Max, his hair literally on fire



like he was a damn phoenix. I had to blink a few times before taking in the rest of him. His caramel skin had a glint of illumination to it, almost as if he'd slathered on sparkly golden lotion. He had an oval face with a sharp chin and black eyes that carried a golden tint to them.

Compared to Yukikyo's uptight, emotionless expression, he was completely relaxed and grinning like a complete jock ready to dominate a basketball court.

He had to be Beta Simon.

Those nearby were already bowing, but Max remained calm as ever before a wide grin lit up his entire face.

"What took you so long?" Max inquired. "You missed all the good shit."

"So we heard," Beta Simon groaned. "We got the brief report from Alpha Rogue and Alpha Surge. They're setting up the carriages, but we wanted to check in to see what tasks we can complete until we find another Magic Expeditioner."

He looked over at me and took a good up-and-down look of me.

"Who are you?"

"Alexis," I casually replied. "Your hair is on fire, by the way."

He grinned as if I'd made his entire day as he waved at his hair to attempt to put it out. "I would have never guessed," he sang but looked at me carefully. "Never seen a phoenix wolf before?"

"Phoenix wolf," I muttered and remembered all the fascinating knowledge about them. "Extremely rare, but you all take care of your own and stick together in nests forbidden to other supernatural entry, correct?"

He seemed shocked by my words and I noticed Beta Yukikyo's intrigued eyes as she showed a hint of shock of her own.

Max decided to state the obvious as he rose up to his feet.

"Beta Simon and Beta Yukikyo, this is Queen Alexis. Due to our lack of privacy, we won't go into details, but she's of royal heritage," he revealed.

The two of them acted immediately - bowing on one knee and lowering

their heads in acknowledgment.

"Your Majesty," they said in unison.

"Damn." I was a little shocked myself before I looked at Max. "How'd you earn them but get stuck with that double agent bastard, Eric?"

"Long story," he admitted. "When we get to the surface, we can go into details of that at the pack property."

"Pack property?" I inquired. "Wait. I'm coming?"

"You don't really have a choice, Mate," he reminded, but his statement got his Betas' attention as Beta Yukikyo returned her calculative gaze on me.

"Mate?" Those mismatched eyes went back and forth between Max and me, while Beta Simon was already wrapping an arm around Max's neck and practically choking him.

"Mate?! You mean MATE mate?! Meaning your twenty-nine-year-old ass isn't a fucking loner anymore? What?! Praise Mother Goddess of the highest Moon! Our Alpha found himself a woman!"

"Once again, you remind me why I need to kill you in your sleep," Max dryly declared.

Beta Simon was literally hiding behind me in a blink. "Your Majesty, save me!"

I slowly looked over my shoulder to see he was actually trembling in fear while his flaming hair looked like it was about to extinguish.

"He's just joking, you know?" I pointed out.

"That's what you say, but next thing you know your body is in a block of ice for a week for pushing your Alpha's buttons too far."

I thought about it and gave him a sly grin as my eyes narrowed in judgment.

"You deserved it, didn't you?"

"No!" he dramatically gasped and placed a hand on his chest like I'd called him out on his biggest sin.

Beta Yukikyo decided to add, "He did. He told Alpha Maximus that if he

didn't change his ice-cold attitude, he'd never find a mate."

"Ohhh." I drawled out the sound as my lips replicated the shape of a circle. "You fucked up."

"I know, but I thought I was giving good advice! When he scowls, it's unattractive! What girl wants a cold, emotion-AH!" Beta Simon couldn't finish as he jumped back to avoid the tiny blob of shadows that emerged. "No! Echo, don't swallow me! Your punishments are worse than being frozen."

"It's like you asked to be punished," I commented while watching Echo float in a haunting manner that had Simon quivering - *literally*. "Besides, even without this whole random mate bond, Max is hot when he looks bored as fuck with a dose of 'why are you bothering my existence'. Very hot honestly, and if he does that all the time, imagine the fun in the bedroom of being pinned and ramped up like a sex doll."

Beta Simon was gawking in horror, totally not caring that Echo floated over to sit on his head, while Beta Yukikyo stared at me for a long moment.

"Only if it includes handcuffs, a belt, and being suspended above the bed with a tie blindfold across your eyes."

We all looked at her as she stood there like she hadn't said the craziest BDSM shit, but I grinned menacingly and leaned in as if I were standing right next to her to whisper, "But you'd miss the empowering expression of domination on their face with the blindfold."

"Nope," she replied, and actually blessed us with a tiny smirk. "He'd purposely let you stare into his unimpressed face for a solid minute while talking dirty about all the things he'd do to you and that very expression would be burned into your memory as he blindfolds you for the next stage of torture."

"H-How do you know this?" Beta Simon sounded appalled.

"A girl's gotta eat," she stated with a slight shrug.

"Wow," I whispered. "I think I found a best friend."

Max snickered again, drawing our attention over to him as he covered his mouth to muffle the sound. "I'm glad you're at least getting along with my remaining Betas," he concluded.

"How were you able to find us?" I decided to ask while I noticed Echo lift off from Beta Simon's head to begin floating towards me.

"Yuki can track anything. She doesn't need magic to do it. Her cat qualities are dangerously on point."

"Cat?" I inquired in shock as I looked her up and down. Eve may be asleep, but I could clearly use her senses to pick up the obvious wolf scents on both of them. "I smell wolf on both of you."

"I'm a hybrid," Beta Yukikyo announced like it wasn't a big deal. "Mother cat, father wolf. You get how things go. And viola. Me."

I'd be lying if I didn't say I absolutely loved her casual monotone voice that basically dimmed down anything that was drastically shocking in nature. Echo landed on my head, and I lifted my eyes up as if I could see the blob of darkness.

Only, I noticed the outstretched pink paw before a kitten of inky darkness emerged upside-down and in my face.

"Maew."

I actually gawked in fascination, followed with the most girlish squeal that had ever escaped my lips.

"Echo's a kitten?!" I slowly lifted her off my head, lowering her in front of my face just to take in the being of shadowy cuteness. "You're mine. I'll take you to my penthouse up in the surface and buy you a bunch of toys and get you a nice scratching post and-"

"Why do I feel like she forgot Echo was Max's?" Beta Simon questioned.

"What's Alpha's is now Luna's," Beta Yukikyo noted. "Nothing is his anymore."

"Echo's a shapeshifter," Max revealed to me as I tugged my amazed eyes away from the cute creature of darkness to look at him.

"Meaning they can become anything?" I inquired.

I knew of shapeshifters, but instead of being individuals able to shift into anything, the shapeshifters in ancient history were described creatures that chose their owners and could change into anything that would protect or benefit them. They had a bit of consciousness and could make decisions and listen to easy commands, but lacked the intelligence or abilities to become a functioning human unless their magical code was copied - *similar to a genetic code in the typical human.*

"He can shift into almost anything. I've only had him for a year. I was traveling in the Void after a wave hit. I dropped into an abandoned nest with only him left. I didn't realize he'd clung to me until I'd returned and Simon told me."

"Literally, he was stuck in his hair and he didn't notice," Beta Simon stated with a shake of his head. "It was obvious, and yet he walked around the pack house with his serious 'everyone will die' expression and a black blob in his hair."

The image made me giggle as I lowered Echo into my lap.

"I've always wanted a cat, but with how random waves are, it didn't seem like I'd be home much. My penthouse is normally empty anyways."

"Where do you reside?" Beta Yukikyo inquired.

"New York City. It was going to be a temporary thing, but well...life just forced me to stay there. Plus, they have good bakeries."

"Stays for the bakeries," Beta Simon concluded. "I'd do that as long as they had a really good steak."

"Takoyaki," Beta Yukikyo stated.

"We came down here for business, but I guess life is going to force us to stay awhile," Max quietly commented as his eyes met mine. There was that shared look that brought me comfort, and I didn't fight the potential idea of us having some sort of future with one another.

I really couldn't wait to have a calming moment to think because I felt

like I was on a rollercoaster of change that was demanding I adapt just as fast for the next section of utter chaos heading out way.

"Maew." Echo moved out of my grasp to walk off my lap and over to my injured ankle. Just the mere nudge to it made me flinch, rewarding me with three lingering stares before Beta Yukikyo asked the prime question, "Are you hurt, Alexis?"

"Uh...it's not a big deal," I voiced. "Just broke my ankle."

The three of them stared at me like I'd told them I had a minute to live.

"Wait, seriously?" Beta Simon huffed. "Isn't there a healer going around? Why haven't you been attended to?" He actually sounded like he'd kill someone in seconds, but it was the sudden chill that made me shiver and left me fearing for Grayson's life.

*The spike of frost was coming off of Maximus.*

"I didn't inform Grayson." I got straight to the point. "I'd rather he ensures the crew and knights are okay first before attending to me. It's not like I'm moving anywhere. I figured I could heal it on my own, but Maeve's a bit drained and I guess I am, too."

Beta Simon was already leaving us with an authoritative walk that demanded the nearest crew and knights to stop in their tracks and rush to ask if their assistance was needed. "Where's Grayson?!" he barked.

"A-A few feet down that way, sir. He's taking a break."

That just made Beta Simon's aura spike further as he went on a stomping spree in the pointed direction. Now I just felt horrible, but I noticed Beta Yukikyo crouch down and reach out to lightly touch my ankle.

I flinched again and hissed at the movement but tried to keep myself calm and not follow the queasy urge to vomit.

"Why didn't you speak earlier?"

"I really don't like bothering people," I replied.

*Bothering, relying, depending on anyone who will use it against me.*

"You seem to be more of a delight than a bother," Beta Yukikyo quietly

mumbled before she closed her eyes. Max remained quiet, which was honestly giving me anxiety cause I wasn't sure if he was mad or in the murderous phase of "pissed off".

His eyes were focused on my injury, but it also seemed like he wasn't a hundred percent present, which meant he could have been talking with the Betas in their pack connection.

The thought left me wondering what it was like. As a royal, I hadn't gotten to experience the type of pack life where you had an Alpha who could communicate with you through the mind or know if you were basically dying from the inside out.

As queen, it would have been my role to be the Alpha and expand my pack, but with the lack of experience, I wouldn't be ready to take that on just yet.

*With my lack of trust, would I be able to rely on Betas to assist me when I haven't known them for years?*

Beta Yukikyo closed her eyes to concentrate further, and the pain began to fade away as more warmth flooded my leg. I don't know if it was the relief of the fading energy or the overall magic carrying a drowsy effect, but my eyes began to grow heavy in seconds.

"Hmm. Now I'm just...sleepy," I muttered like it was a nuisance.

I felt Max to my left, his closeness only further encouraging the relaxation of my tense muscles. After everything that had transpired thus far, I would be lying if I didn't acknowledge how truly drained I felt.

"Alexis," he whispered, and I had the intention to reply, but my very lips felt heavy, like the rest of my body. Sitting too long could have forced my body to take a breather, but I disliked the thought of being a sitting duck right now.

For some odd reason, I didn't feel like I was in danger with Max and his newly arrived Betas, who seemed far laxer than a certain Beta that tried to kill us. But was it fair of me to rely on him?

*Did I really have a choice in this matter?*

"It's healed, Alpha," Beta Yukikyo announced. "I checked her body for any other injuries or imbalances. She'll need some rest in general as her levels are very low. It's impressive that she stayed conscious for this long."

"She's not one to rely on others." Max spoke as if he truly knew me. "She was amidst the chaos on the surface before being pushed into this side of the realms. I unconsciously called to her and she showed up."

"Is she who I believe she is?"

Max was quiet for a moment. "I believe so, but I want to know for sure. No...that's not the proper way of saying it. Within my heart, I know, and Adam is pretty confident about the idea as well..."

"But?" Beta Yukikyo prompted.

There was a long moment of silence and I couldn't tell if I'd drifted to sleep or not, but the slow movement of my body being lifted into his arms told me the silence was from their side.

"I feel like she's too good for me."

No way was I expecting him to state something like that as an Alpha, and yet the silence lingered as those words laid heavy in the thick air.

"You may be right," Beta Yukikyo admitted. "But our Goddess of the Moon blesses us with balance. To you, she may be doted in glittering gold, but maybe there are qualities in you that she unexpectedly needs in a mate. They don't need to be just physical benefits."

"You're right," he admitted. "All of this is rather..."

"Fast?" she pointed out the obvious.

"Extremely fast," he agreed. "Yet...I don't want it to slow down. Or maybe I'm afraid if it does, something will screw this up. Eric almost did."

"He's a traitor of the worst kind. I'm disappointed that we couldn't make it earlier to aid you in the battle to retrieve him, but I doubt he'll be giving up if he still has life in him."

"He'll be back. I saw the way he looked at Alexis. Full of fucking



jealousy," Max spat the word out in pure disgust. "He's an accomplice in the fall of Alexis's kingdom. We could have made the arrest even before this confrontation with Alexis, but no. I was following protocol."

"You're implying Alexis is the Rejected Queen he'd boast about when drunk?"

The fact I'd received a nickname over something out of my control took a jab at my heart that strove for vengeance, but it wasn't enough for Max to hopefully notice.

"Yes. Alexandra was the mate Eric had rejected five years ago at the apparent 'party' he attended that night."

"Why does it feel like a mistake on our Goddess's part for pairing the two of them together?" Beta Yukikyo mumbled and added, "No offense, Moon Goddess."

"If it was the Eric we once knew...he could have been worthy of someone like Alexis, but like the way that Eric has changed into the disloyal prick of a cheating ass, I'm sure Alexis was forced to change from the loss of her kingdom and all those she cherished."

*Disloyal prick of a cheating ass?*

"Alpha Rogue stated a woman saved him," Beta Yukikyo quietly stated. "Should I assume?"

"Your assumptions are valid," he huffed, and I felt the tension in his body. "Don't inform my parents about it. I'll do the honors when we return to the surface. I'll tell Sis for her sake, but we don't have the luxury of sparing any more wolves for expeditions right now."

"What's the plan, Alpha? There were multiple sources telling us before we entered the wave that there's a sword of treasure in this realm that everyone is desperate to claim."

"We have no choice but to venture north from here. We'll do that and hope this artifact is somewhere along the way."

"And if we have to face a pack of enemies?"

"If we need to, we'll conquer them swiftly and claim what is surely meant to be in our possession."

"I have one more question, Alpha."

"What is it, Yuki?"

"Are you happy?" The question seemed odd in nature, and yet I was curious as to what the reply would be. Something soft touched my forehead.

"I am, Yukikyo." His admission was so tender. "All I fear now is it slipping away from me when I've simply enjoyed a taste of it."

*What journey had Alpha Maximus endured before we finally crossed paths?*



~MAXIMUS~

***"THIS DOUCHE of a healing Expeditioner is gonna act like he didn't notice Alexis's injury?"***

I remained calm as I continued to carry Alexis in my arms. Beta Simon was on his ranting tangent, the "verbal steam" of our group. He didn't have the patience - *or tolerance* - for bullshit, and it was obvious that if I didn't tell him to calm down, he'd tear Grayson into shreds and set his body parts on fire.

*It's fine, Simon. Yuki healed Alexis and she's resting.*

***"Doesn't make it right, Alpha! Alexis was sitting there in misery for how long before we'd arrived?"***

He had a point. I was trying not to think about it because it made my blood boil, my vision red, and would encourage me to kill Grayson instead of being a civil Alpha and requesting why he'd purposely ignored attending to Alexis first.

It was honestly common sense. She'd fought vigorously and was the very reason why none of the crew and knights were injured, and yet he'd completely ignored this part of the shore to attend to everyone else but the hero in this scenario.

**"He's a coward of fucking cowards, that's what,"** Adam growled. He was prowling in my mind like he owned it, but I ignored his complaints to focus on answering Simon.

*I agree with you, and we'll formally deal with Grayson's lack of efficiency when we're above the surface. For now, we may need his assistance to get to a safer area.*

**"I could get us to a safer area at this point," he huffed. "If it wasn't for the lingering shadow shit, we could shift and be on our way rather than having to take this carriage route."**

*Are they ready?*

**"Almost. Yours is ready, Alpha. You can make your way to the carriage with our Luna."**

The mention of Luna almost made me smile. If I wasn't walking with Yuki through the created path of bowing crew members, I would have allowed myself to grin at the idea.

For so long I'd craved a woman who'd meet the title of Luna, but never did I envision someone like Alexandra.

My heart was already speeding up in galloping haste while my brain fought hard to not accept this just yet. Alexis wasn't giving me the vibes like Cynthia had. So far, she'd been genuinely honest, straight up in her actions and personality, and had a controlling fierceness about her that forced those around her to acknowledge she wasn't a pushover.

*Compared to that manipulative bitch who did everything she could to use me. To dare attempt to steal everything I'd worked hard for.*

I pushed her out of my mind, but I held Alexis a little tighter as the flash of the woman with white hair flashed through my mind. I hadn't seen her in

five long years, and yet she was fucking my hidden enemy.

To think I was too blind to see it, to notice the obvious signs and excuses Eric would deliver to get out of doing things. Yesterday was going to be the last straw after he'd left mere minutes before the unexpected fiasco of waves had crashed through the outskirts of the city and pulled all of us into the Void Mastery.

He hadn't made it far enough to ignore the need for a ship, so he'd come through on that front, but then departed with the excuse of retrieving Grayson to aid in the remainder of the journey. All these emotions were forcing me to remind the foolish boy I was to believe everyone in this pack wanted good for me, but Eric's betrayal unlocked a wound I'd thought wasn't bleeding out profusely.

*And the bandage that was saving me from going berserk was sleeping in my arms.*

We reached the carriage, and Yuki began inspecting it from head to toe. I trusted the crewmen and knights, but were you ever too careful after the crazy stunt we'd dealt with? I knew Alpha Rogue was extremely upset. He'd never show it to anyone around here, but I could guarantee the pure rage he was carrying was the visible proof that his son had indeed betrayed him, his pack, and any alliances he carried.

The moment we returned to the surface world, the news would spread through the grapevine of wolf shifters and supernatural beings. His name would bring a wave of disgrace and gossip, and only make many of us Alphas more anxious about the idea of trusting Expeditioners.

There were so few of them, and it was dangerous to enter the Void without one of them within your expedition crew, but this would make things harder.

I'd grasped the signs of Eric's deceitful behavior, but I'd act like the fool if it meant keeping innocent shifters safe from a fallout.

*Today was an example of what I'd been fighting to avoid this entire time.*

Months of attempting to tame my obvious anger on the matter, acting like I didn't see through Eric's facade, was for nothing. What satisfaction it was to watch the envy he carried when Alexis wouldn't cum until I told her to.

*I didn't expect that level of loyalty at all.*

My eyes lowered to the beauty within my grasp, my eyes trailing down her sleeping figure while taking in the many captivating qualities she carried.

Mother Goddess of our Sacred Moon took her time creating her: the way her hair shifted from black to such a dazzling pink with tinsel strands of white, her flawless skin with a hint of tan, her cheeks slightly rosy with blush, her lips with a tint of plum.

Even after all the madness that had transpired since entering this wave, I could think of the pleasurable experience I'd enjoyed with her. The raw flow of emotions that had overflowed my senses and begged to be listened to.

The pain she'd dealt with from Eric's rejection had certainly done a number on her strong, iron heart, and somehow I'd allowed myself to be vulnerable for her sake - allowing her to experience exactly how I felt in that moment when the single word left my lips.

*Mate.*

I'd spent years wondering what the fuck was wrong with me. The burden and mockery I'd experienced for not accepting Cynthia's offer made me into a laughing stock amongst my own. It was a good experience to endure, no matter the pain it delivered.

Her deceitful plan had forced me to purge those around me until it was down to my three Betas, my pack that had sworn devotion to my side of power, and my family. A smaller circle ensured I could see exactly what was going on, and it was why I noticed the signs of Eric's approaching betrayal, but breaking the connection to the pack had given me enough information.

*I just need a moment to decipher it all.*

"I guess it'll be best for me to ask why Alexis is unconscious for the sake of everyone's survival."

Glancing over my shoulder revealed Yuki with Rafael, the dragon wolf hybrid who seemed to be one of Alexis's protectors. From the outstretch of his wings that began to retract into his back, he'd just returned.

"She's okay." I got to the point. "Her ankle was broken. We didn't know that until Echo nudged at it. Beta Yukikyo here healed her but her healing methods have a lethargic effect that prompts the client to sleep to further speed up the recovery process."

"Why didn't Grayson heal her?" Raf stated with an obvious frown. "He has healing capabilities, and it doesn't make Alexis freak out."

The second part intrigued me. "Freak out?"

"Alexis doesn't like to be healed by many. She'd rather endure the pain and basically wait for her body to heal itself with her wolf abilities. Broken bones are slower to heal and with this haze of darkness in the air, it would've probably taken hours to deal with. Aside from that, she gets anxious if someone other than Edwin or Grayson heals her."

"I attended to our Luna's wound," Yuki answered with her usual monotone voice. I could tell she didn't like Raf's fierce energy that burned like a dancing flame. I was sure he was displaying his dominance as a reminder of what he could do if we tried to harm Alexis.

Normally, I'd react to the threat, but with Alexis in my grasp and Adam not giving two shits about his arrival, I didn't see the need to have a contest over who could overpower whom.

"Luna," Raf repeated before looking at Alexis - specifically at the imprint mark. He looked back at me, an unreadable expression on his face before he bobbed his head slightly. "She didn't freak out?"

"No," I replied. "Was rather calm in general."

"Intriguing," he replied, and I noticed the way Yukikyo's body stiffened.

"Could you let Edwin know I'm not going to kill Alexis?" I politely asked, sensing the hovering energy without lifting my head to acknowledge the large wolf that surely was imagining what I'd taste like.

That made Rafael laugh before he outstretched his arms and placed his hands behind his head.

"Edwin, he's Alexis's mate. We sadly can't kill him and hide his body. So lay off and switch back, would you?"

The growl that followed made Yuki widen her stance and hiss back. That intrigued Raf as he arched an eyebrow in her direction. "She's a hybrid?"

"Cat wolf," she answered on her own. "And you could ask after your comrade backs down from threatening our Alpha."

"Are you guys having a showdown without me?"

We all turned our attention to see Simon heading towards us with Grayson in tow. One look at his blank expression told me he had to have said something to him before making their way back.

*Did you threaten him, Simon?*

***"I certainly did not threaten to destroy his very friendship that he cares so dearly about for being a jealous fool when our Luna is internally suffering," he reasoned. "I just reminded him who you are. That's all."***

I mentally sighed back at him and felt Yuki's slight amusement at his response. She didn't normally speak in the mental connection unless it was necessary, but Simon enjoyed talking in it to comment about anything he couldn't just say out loud.

"No," Rafael declared and eyed Grayson with an unsatisfied look. "Grayson, did I not say Alexis needed to be seen for a broken ankle?"

"Yes." Grayson couldn't avoid the question, but he surely was avoiding our gazes. "She didn't seem like she was in pain."

"Well no shit, Sherlock," Simon huffed. "Either Alexis has a really high pain tolerance, or the reason she wasn't showing any type of discomfort was because she was staying as still as possible onshore."

"There's no excuse," My voice was edged with authority, enough to get all of their attention, including Grayson. "If you think I mated with Alexis to piss you or your comrades off, that wasn't my intention in the slightest. Our

connection simply happened and we've yet to fully grasp it ourselves."

I paused to emphasize my words and for them to truly grasp our current circumstances.

"I don't know what Alexis's relationship with you was, nor is it my business, to be frank. However, after the heroic actions she displayed to ensure our crewmen from various packs and our knights were kept safe when they were in the midst of harm's way, surely she deserved immediate medical attention, which you decided to brush off."

I noticed he grew rigid at my direct accusations, but I wasn't going to play around with the issue – *and neither was Adam*. We both were rather possessive in nature and if anyone tried to fuck with what was ours, they would earn their rightful punishment.

Adam inched closer in control, and I allowed a pinch of my Alpha energy to seep through my muscles and pierce the air in warning. If the air was tense before, it only spiked a few notches - leaving my Betas no choice but to bow their heads in submission while I noticed Edwin move entirely from my back to stand next to Rafael, who was observing me calmly.

Grayson at least bowed his head - *not like he had much choice* - as I got to what needed to be said as a forewarning.

"If you two were in a serious relationship, you can say so now," I offered with a hint of amusement, knowing the truth of Grayson's relationship with Alexis. This was his chance to boldly state his feelings for Alexis in front of those who were important to her, plus my Betas, who would be added protection now that our lives were entangled.

A lull of quietness blanketed the circle we'd created, proving what I'd already suspected.

*Grayson was the type who wished to lead and take control of any situation but lost the confidence to do so when the pressure was on.*

I didn't need glasses to see that he indeed carried some emotions for Alexis, but was it enough that he'd risk his life for her? *No.*



He'd been more of a burden in the fight, especially when I knew what his capabilities were from past expeditions where he'd offered his services. There could have been so many reasons why he'd held back, but that was in the past.

"Then if you're just friends, I'll personally excuse your lack of judgment this one time," I carried on before my lethal eyes met his nervous gaze. "I know little about Alexis, but one thing I can vow here and now is my loyalty. We're unsure how long we're going to be forced to remain in this wave and the challenges we may face ahead, but with the shift of our circumstances, we'll have to work together to get to our final destination, which is survival on the surface. Nevertheless, Alexis's health and safety is now my business, as it is my Betas'. From now on, as the temporary Expeditioner of this unexpected journey, I suggest you attend to this group's wounds if we are injured. Only in the circumstance where you're unable to perform will I allow Beta Yukikyo to aid in the healing department. Is that reasonable?"

"Yes, Alpha Maximus," he replied without delay.

"Any messups and I'm sure you'll gladly pay the consequences. Just because I'm rather silent in comparison to my Alpha comrades, do not overlook my royal heritage or the fear of my name on the lips of all those who quiver at the mention of my pack and kingdom."

My voice dipped further as Adam was far too close to taking complete control.

"So what I'm simply asking is for you to behave," I growled threateningly as my eyes darkened. He stiffened at the slip of my control, giving him a very small reminder of why I was respected in this shifter world of savages.

*If he'd forgotten, I would remind him.*

"Or else we'll have to re-evaluate your loyalty as a wave expeditioner. Understood?"

"Yes, Prince Maximus."

The usage of my royal title only made me crack the perfect grin of

confidence before Adam pulled back entirely and I felt back to my normal confident self. No one said anything as I returned my attention to Rafael, only to see Edwin was back to his human form.

He was in the new set of clothes we'd provided after the battle, which was a black t-shirt and black cargo pants. The casual look didn't tarnish the controlling essence he carried.

"We'll be riding in carriages until it's safe for the pack to shift. It's faster than walking at this point, but these carriages can only fit two at a time. I suggest you partner up, or you're more than welcome to half shift if that's a possibility," I explained. "However, I suggest we get moving."

"We need to move," Edwin stressed, which grasped our undivided attention. "A black storm is approaching from further south. I scouted as much perimeter I could before I sensed Alexis's decline. It seems we're one of the last groups alive in this wave."

"You were able to get a full view of the entire land?" Simon inquired.

"We're not on the mainland. We're on a very big island. It makes sense as to why it took eons for us to catch up from where we landed, which I can guarantee was on the outskirts of the surface world in NYC. I surveyed the area and only found four groups of bones."

The grim revelation had Simon and Yuki sharing a look before they stood at attention.

"Alpha, let us depart now. We can go ahead with the knights," Yuki encouraged.

"At least if there's any interference, we can be the first line of defense while you protect Alexis," Simon encouraged.

"She won't need protection," Rafael spoke up. "Alexis sleeps in intervals, even when she's recovering from injuries."

I felt like Edwin wanted to say something; his eyes moved from me to where Grayson stood quietly.

"Grayson," I began. "I'd like you to do one more round of checks with the

crew and knights. We'll position you in the back so if anything happens, you'll be able to move forward to the middle and protect the most vulnerable. Seem fair?"

"Fair," he replied and bowed his head once more. "I'll excuse myself to get to it."

He waited for me to bob my head in acknowledgment before he swiftly departed from where we stood to do what I'd ordered. I caught onto the sight of Alpha Surge and Alpha Rogue approaching our group.

"Is Fallen Beauty sleeping?" Alpha Rogue inquired, though his expression was rather blank compared to his usual jovial appearance.

"Yes," I assured him, waiting for him and Alpha Surge to be part of our make-shift circle. "Yuki, can you please?"

She knew protocol. A transparent bubble formed immediately around our group. I waited an extra second for it to solidify and then looked to Edwin.

"There's more you want to share, and I'm going to assume it's regarding Alexis's identity. We may have managed to keep it on the down-low amongst us, but if there's something I need to know to further aid my mate, I want to learn about it pronto."

"There's a risk of Maeve coming out," he announced as his eyes darkened. "Maeve is Alexandra's wolf, but Alexis isn't aware of Maeve's ability to fully take over."

"Why?" Alpha Surge questioned. "Isn't it natural for any of our wolf counterparts to have control when shifted?"

"You're not understanding what he means," Rafael stepped in. "He's not saying the risk is of Alexandra shifting. He's saying Maeve is an actual entity who can control Alexis's body without the need to shift."

"Isn't that only possible with a certain magic artifact?" Alpha Rogue offered. "There are less than 0.5% of supernaturals who can do that, and I'm rather certain they're all wolves and currently upon a throne."

"She would have been upon a throne if it hadn't been destroyed," Rafael

stated with a look that forced everyone else to put one and two together.

"You're implying..." Simon began but trailed off.

"I'm not implying," Rafael urged. "I'm confirming who Alexis is, which is the reason why it's being brought up."

Edwin's eyes darkened as he crossed his arms over his chest. "We're unsure how long this alliance will last, but if you want our complete cooperation, we need to ensure you'll keep such knowledge a secret," he stressed. "If you're unable to do so, simply state it now. I'll gladly wipe the conversation out of your memories and ensure you're as clueless as Grayson."

I wasn't concerned about my Betas, since their loyalty was absolute, but I briefly looked over to Alpha Surge. I knew him the least, but I also didn't feel like he was one to betray anyone. Impatience, short-temperament, and recklessness were his common traits many spoke of, but an Alpha at his rank would know how to keep a few secrets.

"I have no issue with Fallen Beauty's identity. I vow to conceal the truth of who she is to anyone outside this circle," Alpha Rogue vowed.

"Seeing as we're in an alliance, I see no reason not to keep her identity a secret. If that's the requirement, so be it," Alpha Surge grumbled. "Mind you, I'm only agreeing for my own safety and benefit."

"Sure, sure," Rafael dismissed as if he could see right through him. "Admit it. You didn't expect Alexis to be powerful, especially as a woman."

Alpha Surge scowled as his brows drew together, but he answered, "Ask yourself in our current supernatural society, how many wolf shifters that are women have demonstrated such power without the consequences of death?"

Rafael looked far too amused to even answer, and his prolonged silence forced Alpha Surge to answer his own question. "Four. In the world. Two of them being in NYC."

"And now you know the fifth," Rafael concluded, emphasizing his point.

"Anyone else have concerns?" Edwin offered. It was obvious the rest of us were perfectly fine with these terms and conditions. "Good. To get to the

point, Alexis can't know about Maeve's controlling abilities."

"Why?" Simon decided to inquire, but my brain was moving far faster - enough for me to voice my opinion. "Did Alexandra complete all the crowning requirements before the attack?"

All eyes landed on me as I continued to hold the royal maiden in my grasp.

Edwin observed me carefully - surely judging me for how I'd specifically know the procedures when I'd yet to take the throne.

*At least to the rest of the world, they fell for that illusion.*

"After the Crowning Ceremony, another is done privately. Every royal family has a treasured artifact that carries generations of power, typically a crown because that's the one piece of inheritance that is passed down to many rulers. Without the ceremony, the crown carries the raw magic of the very first ruler of the kingdom. That magic never dies. It simply grows and is threaded into the heir's body during the second ceremony, which unites both energies into one. This process allows the ancient magic to mold with the current wolf's traits, creating one force. Instead of the wolf losing its born persona, it's empowered by the magic, which in return magnifies the heir's abilities, strength, and overall ability to rule."

"If that doesn't happen..." Yuki trailed off and I knew it clicked. The others' expressions were no different from her shocked one.

"Without the second ceremony, the ancient magic has nothing to bond to, forcing it to create its own entity by replicating the heir's wolf persona," Edwin revealed.

"Wait. So if...Maeve is the crown's persona, who's Alexandra's wolf?" Simon asked the prime question, but I knew the answer. As did Adam.

"Eve." I spoke the name confidently, enough to grasp their eyes once more. "I think Adamson met Maeve. It was brief, but it occurred."

"I'm still a tad confused," Alpha Rogue admitted. "So you're saying that the crown replicates the persona of the heir's wolf. Doesn't that mean this

Maeve and Eve are twins?"

"Bingo," Rafael calmly stated. "Twins that know of each other's existence but are keeping it a secret from Alexandra."

"Why?" Alpha Surge inquired in seriousness. "Why would it be detrimental for Alexandra to know that she has her wolf and another entity with the ability to control her?"

"We're yet to determine if Maeve's intentions for Alexandra are good or bad," Rafael answered truthfully.

"Why would she hurt her?" Yuki asked. "Obviously, Alexandra is the host. Meaning anything negative that happens to her ruins the chances for Maeve to even attempt to take control, correct?"

"Yes," Edwin replied, "But we're not referring to physical damage, but rather mental damage."

"Mental?" I offered. "You think she'd have dissociative identity disorder or something?"

"Not necessarily," Rafael replied and shook his head. "Much worse than that, actually."

"Then?" Simon pressed. "What would happen?"

"There's the potential of Maeve fully taking over Alexandra's mind," Edwin revealed.

"If that were her intention, wouldn't she have already done so?" Simon suggested. "I mean, I would."

"I think you're underestimating ancient magic," Alpha Rogue chipped in. One look at his expression and I knew he was putting together the pieces to this major problem.

*This problem that's happened before and is the very reason for our suffering now.*

"Magic artifacts, in general, aren't simply sought out for their magic capabilities. Many seek the knowledge engrained in the artifact, as well as the past behind its creation. Royal artifacts especially are preserved for

generations and used with each heir. If a crown has been passed down to ten heirs, that means that crown carries the past memories, knowledge, experiences, and powers it has gathered from all those timelines," Alpha Rogue explained as his eyes filled with heaviness. "Now imagine all the turmoil, stress, agony, and burdens royals carry through their lifetimes."

Edwin nodded and continued on Alpha Rogue's behalf, "They see the rise of their kingdoms, and sometimes the fall of what they've built. Just because Alexandra's kingdom fell when she was crowned, that doesn't mean it hasn't happened in the past and been rebuilt. Adding the reality that this second ceremony wasn't conducted, Maeve with the strength she carries had to helplessly watch the fall of the kingdom her generations have preserved. What makes this tricky is that she wasn't able to interfere because there wasn't a long enough bond established for her to possess any control. So if you were in her shoes, who would be the best to blame?"

"Alexandra," Yuki whispered. "Not because she didn't acknowledge the threat, but because the bond wasn't established fast enough since Alexandra had to be just of age, right?"

"Yes," Rafael replied. "She'd just turned twenty that day."

"But it's still not her fault. Maeve should know that," Simon argued.

"It's not about who's at fault," Alpha Surge spoke up. "It's about the reality that Alexandra was too weak for Maeve to interfere. She could want to use that against her."

"So you're saying Maeve could potentially harm Alexandra by controlling her out of spite?" Simon summarized.

"Yes," Edwin replied. "But what we worry about is the possibility that she won't let Alexandra switch back."

"You're worried the past will repeat itself," I whispered, our eyes locking at my soft-spoken revelation. He slowly nodded his head and I decided to share what very little I knew. "She'd become just like the Dark Senator."

That got Simon and Yuki's attention as Rafael bobbed his head.

"The Dark Senator wasn't always dark. Not many know what happened, but he discovered an artifact that he shouldn't have. One that was forbidden because it has intense darkness that has been chained since the beginning of time. He'd spent years trying to discover it, but he didn't follow the instructions for how to properly open the tomb. The result led to him retrieving the artifact but doing nothing to seal the magic to his wolf. The Senator used the artifact over the course of five years, using the magic it carried to retrieve other artifacts to further advance his knowledge. Only, he didn't know the entity within the artifact lived on, waiting and absorbing all the knowledge and power grasped from each artifact collected. When the Senator discovered the truth, he decided to try to seal the entity off. It pissed the entity off and thus, he not only took control of the Senator, but he also sealed him into the magic artifact in exchange."

"So it's like a genie in the bottle," Simon whispered as he thought out loud. "One makes a bunch of wishes until the genie has had enough and decides to switch roles with the wisher. However, instead of him making a wish, he keeps the wisher trapped in a lamp while he lives out his life. That's the story I was told when I was a young pup."

"Those tales were created to explain what created the Dark Senator," I revealed. "Royal children are told the story of the Senator early on in life so that if we discover magic artifacts within our lifetimes, we'll be extra cautious and do the right methods of requesting the power of the artifact."

"Why couldn't Alexandra perform what needs to be done to do the bonding?" Yuki asked.

"There's a certain time window," Edwin answered. "We missed it because, after the fall of our kingdom, we were hit by the first wave."

"Overall, you're worried that if Alexandra acknowledges Maeve's presence, she'll insist on being rid of her, and thus Maeve will be infuriated at being rejected by her own hostess and will attempt to control her permanently while sealing her persona into the crown."



"Yes," Rafael and Edwin replied.

"What about Eve?" Yuki spoke. "Wouldn't she interfere?"

"Maeve and Eve are technically twins. With Maeve in control, she can easily manipulate her mind into completely forgetting Alexandra. That would force Eve to forget as well," Edwin revealed.

*Shit. So complicated.*

"So for now, no mention of Maeve," Simon emphasized.

"Alexandra will introduce her wolf as Maeve, but her nickname is Eve. Keep this in mind," Edwin urged. "If Maeve shows up, it's normally to protect Alexandra's body or for personal gain. You'll definitely see the difference. It doesn't happen often, but when it does, play to her tune."

"Does playing to her tune include her killing us?" Simon inquired. I actually had to fight not to roll my eyes, but I guess it was a rather valid question because Alexandra had proven to be a very strong Alpha female that didn't take bullshit.

"No," Rafael replied with a taunting smirk. "Unless she's bored."

"Right," Simon drawled.

A booming sound from the sky caught our attention. The clouds were already rolling in as darkness shielded any bit of sunlight.

"Okay, we need to move," I encouraged and looked at Alpha Surge and Alpha Rogue. "Alpha Surge, you'll lead with Simon. Take the strongest knights in the front line but leave four so they can be positioned in the back."

"Understood," he answered.

"Alpha Rogue, I want you near the middle. You're the second line of defense. Have a mixture of knights and crewmates."

"Roger," he replied.

"Beta Yuki, I want you at the end. I'll partner you with Grayson. You'll be able to secure the back if a battle occurs, but also go forward and heal anyone within the line above."

"Will do, Alpha."

Finally, I looked at Edwin and Rafael. "Our carriage is going to be in the middle on purpose. I'm going to assume that you'll be aiding us?"

"Back," Edwin said smoothly.

"I'll be flying, so I'll chill in the middle," Rafael concluded.

I nodded and took a glance at Alexis.

"I'll protect Alexis. If she wakes during the ride, she'll stay with me unless necessary. Most importantly, do not shift until we get to clearer ground. If we're forced into a confrontation, use any other method of defense but shifting. We can't risk any of you going feral." I really had to stress that last part because we couldn't afford to fight any of our own.

This alliance may have been unexpected, but it was dangerously in our favor. We couldn't let it be fucked up over careless actions. "Let's prepare to depart."

We all agreed and got moving, which landed me in the carriage after brief orders. I situated Alexis to sit on my left side, her body leaning into mine. I kept a possessive arm around her to ensure she would remain right in place - *with the inner urge to keep her up against me.*

I'd only unlocked a bit of her past and I wanted to do everything I could to protect her. To destroy anyone who wished to try to add to the immense suffering I was sure she experienced over the years. No way would anyone get near her if it were my wish, but I hated the wave worlds because I wasn't in control, in comparison to the surface.

Above opened a bridge of dominance that no one could override. I ruled what breathed in my domain and everyone knew it. This wave world only made me look like a quiet follower, but my Betas and the other Alphas knew better. My quietness and "lack" ended when I was in my element.

*In a world where my royal rank, strength, and financial power played all their roles marvellously.*

The soft touch to my right shoulder forced me to acknowledge Echo. He was back in his ball of shadowed mystery, but my acknowledgement

triggered his shift until he was now a large snake moving along my bicep.

His head moved until he was in my face, hissing away and swaying from side to side. I smirked at his form and waited for one of the knights to close the carriage door before quietly stating what had to be said.

"Echo, I'm unsure what lies ahead, but you must absolutely do everything in your power to protect Alexandra. Understood?"

"Hisss!" he replied, but it didn't satisfy me, so I frowned. The windows of the carriage tinted black in seconds and the black snake with pink eyes moved from my bicep and shifted once more - until I was staring at a slender man sitting cross legged across from me, a ball of shadows resembling a ball of yarn being tossed in one hand while a black dagger with pink incantations spun in his other grasp.

He had pink eyes with black rims and black spikey hair with pink tinsel highlights. His skin had a tint of umber, flawless with a speck of inky illumination, while his attire was similar to the Cheshire Cat from the classic tale, Alice in Wonderland - long-sleeved top with stripes of purple and neon pink, and black pants.

His pink ears twitched as his long, pink furry tail buzzed with black sparks. He let out a dramatic yawn.

"I hate shifting here, you know?" he complained while his eyes observed Alexis. I didn't know why it ticked me off, but the growl escaped my lips before I could tame my jealousy.

"I'm not stealing her, Papa," he hummed in delight. "She's my mom now."

My eyes rolled without mental acknowledgment. "Just protect her if she needs it."

"Certainly," Echo gleefully replied, but I watched as he stopped tossing the ball of shadowed yarn and lightly tapped his lips with the sharp edge of the dagger. "Goddess of the Moon must enjoy giving you what you've yearned for for years, huh?"

My cloaked gaze only furthered his amusement as the slits of his pink

eyes looked like the venomous orbs of a snake.

"Created a woman with the same problem you carry with that entity," he sang with an eerie voice that was surely off-key. "Alexandra. Eve. Maeve," he continued. "Maximus. Adam. Adamson."

He giggled mischievously and sighed. "It looks like I should form an alliance with the queen!"

"As long as it's not romantic," I huffed.

"I would not," Echo reasoned. "Again, I've accepted Alexandra as my mom."

"You just met her."

"And I like her."

"She could get fed up with you."

"She's not you."

"Aren't you worried in the slightest about Maeve?" I inquired.

"Why should one worry when you're merely delighted by this change of events?" he offered back. "You and I know Maeve probably has the same intentions as Adamson."

A heavy sigh left me as my gaze returned to the sleeping beauty. For a flickering moment, I could see us traveling in a carriage just like this, only I wasn't the one bearing my shoulder for my love to lean on.

*I'd been the lover who needed the man I'd come to love's shoulder to rest upon.*

In a flash, it was gone, but that heavy feeling was still present. I still felt the burning desire to destroy those who betrayed me once, while the list of those in the present grew far too long for my comfort.

Eric was the last straw, especially when he was too close to destroying what I'd sought for all these years. It was about time we began to strike people off that very extensive list. All I had to wait for was to get out of this wave.

*Then the revengeful game of chess begins...for all three of us.*

I arched an eyebrow, noticing the sharpness of the blade that was under my chin and the closeness of Echo's face to mine.

*A warning.*

"Remember our agreement," Echo hummed. "You get to enjoy the power of revenge only if you tame that vengeful entity of yours. If not...well, you know what I'll do."

He pulled back and forced me to watch him lick the sharp side of the blade. Blood instantly emerged from the fresh wound along his tongue, but the taste surely excited him as he cloaked his lips with blood that was tinted black. Those wet lips of his were now coal tainted.

"I remember clearly," I answered, feeling that controlling power retract. It allowed me to relax just slightly, having not felt its closeness until I was already slipping into the idea of igniting suffering to all those who deserve to reap the rewards for their past deeds.

*Even if it was a few generations back.*

"Do you think you can do the same with Alexandra?" I asked.

"Certainly," he replied and twirled before sitting back down. The action made him shift into a little boy, his wide pink eyes blinking in marvelous delight as he kicked his legs up and down. "Queen of Flames will adore me!" he cheered. "Children were always her weakness, weren't they?"

I couldn't answer because I didn't want to allow myself to think of that.

*I didn't want to recall a life I was remembering and how hopeful the past me was about bearing children.*

Thinking about the memories that trickled in and out was a mindfuck in a sense, but if I wanted to take down our hidden enemies, this was the path I had to take.

*I'd have to accept that I'd lived before. No more doubt.*

It was easier said than done, a constant internal battle I sometimes forgot I was desperate to win again. With Alexandra in my life, maybe it would be easier to acknowledge who I once was and who I aim to become in this

world.

*Who I'll have to be in order to not fall into the trap I'd blindly walked into the way back then.*

"Switch back," I encouraged. "Before the Dark Fae notices."

"He knows what I am, king," he tossed back at me. "Just as I have a strong suspicion he sees the crown upon your head."

"That's troublesome," I voiced.

"Your secret is safe with him," Echo assured me. "His queen benefits from this courtship, don't you think? As long as his queen is satisfied and safe, he should not need to reveal to anyone the throne you already have in your possession."

"When we return to the surface, how are we integrating Alexis?"

He laughed and surely would have skipped if he had the space to do so. He spun the blade between his fingers like it wasn't a dangerous weapon for a child.

"Focus on the pack. Companionship, acceptance, family. Let her become a part of your life. It will force you to be vulnerable and open, and I think that's what she needs. To see the side of the dark world and how you overpower it and still manage to be the quiet Alpha in the minds of the weak competition."

"She may not like the darkness I carry," I muttered.

"And you may be another blind fool who doesn't see how lethal this woman in your grasp is," Echo tossed back as his blade vanished. He clapped his hands. "Congrats on finding your mate. From the imprint on your back, I'm sure your entwined destinies will lead you two on one path."

"But there'll be challenges," I stated the obvious.

"That's life." He shrugged. "As long as the Senator doesn't get what he wants, you'll get through those challenges."

"And what does he truly want, Echo?" I quietly muttered as I met his crazed eyes. With a blink, he was a man again, one leg crossed over the other

while he held a single chess piece in his grasp.

He allowed me to see the white piece, his grin was so wide, it presented the glimmering white smile that always made me question his sanity.

"That's simple," he replied and chuckled. "All he's missing is a queen."

*My beloved queen that he won't have. Not again.*





## FEVERISH RIDE

~ALEXANDRA~

The purring vibration coming from my left ear nudged me out of the haze of darkness. It felt like I was moving, which had to be the case with the light bouncing up and down feeling that coursed through my surroundings.

I braced for the panic that would attempt to slip into my consciousness and play a lead role in igniting the realms of my anxiety at the thought of losing a moment of control by sleeping, but the purring hum tamed all those debilitating emotions.

*Giving me a moment to just breathe.*

The scent of roasted chestnuts tickled my nostrils first before the scent of pine trickled in. Immediately, whatever was transpiring in the depths of my mind eased. I knew right away I was safe, and the fact that I was able to accept such a swift reaction only left me rather grateful that I could experience this moment in feigned unconsciousness.

It allowed me to embrace this moment in time and analyze how amazing it felt to have a mate. To think this could have been gifted to me five years ago. The burden of becoming the queen of my kingdom at twenty would have been less traumatic if it turned out I'd had a mate like Alpha Maximus that didn't ask questions and just was there to support.

If he'd been there that very night when our eyes locked together, I would

have experienced that wondrous emotion of hope. I would have enjoyed the serenade of happiness, blissful wonder, joyous uncertainty, and the support we would have needed to tackle what was about to transpire.

The heaviness of the past forced me to open my eyes, or else I'd be plagued by those memories.

*I would slip into the grasps of burning nightmares, while the overshadowing of dread and regret would do everything in its power to take my very breath.*

My blurry vision cleared, revealing the interior of a carriage. It wasn't anything fancy, but the nostalgia it kindled made me smile. I hadn't really allowed myself to simmer over the idea of having once lived before, but these trickles of memories that had started since yesterday opened up the conversation, though I'd yet to ask Maximus about it.

I moved slightly, before noticing the curled kitten on my shoulder. My grin further widened as I moved very slowly to retrieve Echo into my hand. He was still purring away, allowing me the privilege to adore his cuteness.

When I was a child, I had an intense fascination with cats. Their cuteness, agility, and stealthy movements always made me want one of my own, but in a kingdom of Inferno wolves, I guess having a pet cat would be odd.

Deciding to lift my head, I paused when my eyes landed on Max. I knew I'd been resting against him, but it was the tranquility upon his face that stole my breath away. He was asleep, his eyes closed and breathing slow, but what a sight to enjoy.

It was like witnessing the true calm in an individual who had to wear so many layers to protect themselves from the rest of the world. I knew that far too well, and Moon Goddess knew just how tiresome it was to continue a facade when all you wished to do was let go.

*To crumble and let those emotions out. To relieve yourself of the constant burden of being seen as someone strong.*

I moved as slowly as I could until my lips lightly pressed against his

cheek. I may have just woken him up, since I felt the slight nudge of awareness within my mind that was connected to his. I forgot about the flowing tunnel that connected us together, not because it wasn't important, but because I'd adapted to its presence far quicker than I expected.

The soft rumble against Max's throat made me wonder if he was going to fall back asleep, but the lids of his eyes scrunched in displeasure and with an added few seconds, lifted to reveal those eyes of frozen beauty.

The heaviness of sleep was still vivid in his light blue orbs, but they slowly moved to check on me, as if it were his prime duty to ensure I was okay.

When our eyes locked, there was that spark of reassurance. Waves of calm thrummed through the two of us as we admired each other. My eyes lowered to his lips, staring at the rough, tempting surface that sought to be sealed with my smooth ones.

I inched upward while he was already meeting me halfway. Our lips pressed firmly against one another's to enjoy the raw touch that sparked various emotions.

Echo's purrs paused, and he moved in my free hand before he had to hop over somewhere else, giving me the chance to lift my hand to press against the side of Max's face. He kissed me deeply, his hand moving to slide into my locks and still my head so he could further control the growing kiss that was overflowing with passion.

The way he kissed was magnificent, the onslaught of various sensations hitting my consciousness and flooding my body. I never imagined meeting someone of the opposite gender who felt so similar to me.

I could taste everything, from our flaws, worries, and fears to the hopeful wonder, gleeful relief, and overall satisfaction in our simple kiss.

I didn't think it was possible to love like this, and yet I'd met someone who I felt completed me. Someone who'd go to the ends of the earth to protect me from any harm that came my way.

For the first time in a long time, I didn't fear the possibility of instability. It was like finding a rock that you knew would always be there for you to rest upon when life got rough.

I wasn't discounting Edwin and Rafael's loyalty, but eventually, a time would come when they would have lives to live, responsibilities to carry, love to acquire, and ultimately, I'd become a second priority, which was something all kings and queens had to prepare for.

*Yet, with Max, I didn't need to worry about that, because he was my mate who would wish to stay by my side.*

His lips feasted on me, and my body grew hot from the intensity of the kiss. Even when his lips grew colder with every movement, it only made my body burn stronger in a combative nature that surely would turn our surroundings into a war zone of hot and cold.

*Fire and ice.*

He broke the kiss when neither of us could stand the prickling intensity, but he moved to the nape of my neck and began to nip the flesh with those frigid lips. I moaned and leaned further back, prompting him to continue taunting me while his hands moved down my body as if craving to feel every inch.

I wished we were back in his private room, splattered upon his bed and naked beneath those sheets. He growled into my mouth and without struggle, I was sitting on his lap with my front side facing his and our lips in a lock that left me sizzling in lust.

Was all of this real? Not a figment of my imagination that desperately yearned for someone as sensual yet masculine? Someone powerful yet gentle. A male counterpart who was able to express their passion for their love without feeling weak or incompetent.

*An Alpha Wolf who could be dominant with the need to overpower his partner.*

His tongue boldly slipped into my mouth, roaming freely, like he'd

already claimed these inner walls of mine. His hands didn't hesitate to slip beneath my attire. The electric charge triggered by his ice-cold fingers made me gasp, followed by a mellow moan.

Deepening the kiss further, he tugged at the waistband of my shorts, leaving me wriggling in anticipation as I wrapped my arms around his neck. He somehow could see what was unfolding in my mind, his movements swift as he rose up high enough to have me dangling from his neck as he effortlessly lowered my shorts enough to do what we both yearned for.

If I allowed myself to think of our circumstances, I'd be distracted - *and worried* - about what was beyond us, but in this lustful dream that was thankfully reality, I could slip away from what was outside this carriage and focus on this.

*On Maximus.*

He sat back onto the black velvet seat – and I was lost within another mesmerizing kiss that left us breathless. I loved this. All of this. The desperation for one another's taste. The palpitation of our hearts against our chests. The heavy breathing, tingly touch, and the scent of my arousal cloaking the air.

The hunger that shone so brightly within those eyes of frost that showed me more than I bet anyone normally got a sight of made my heart melt for this man. And to think, in less than forty-eight hours, we had been tied by fate to follow one path instead of crossing into two directions.

My fingers begged to feel his flesh, thankful that Max's current attire was laxer than his previous garments of protection. The black ensemble made it easy enough to slip my hands beneath his black shirt and enjoy the touch of his rock-hard abs.

He shivered at my heated press, relaxing as my hands laid on his flesh. Our lips were on a course of their own, as we enjoyed the addictive movements and pleasure striking taunts we delivered to one another. I didn't hesitate when I felt like licking his bottom lip, tugging at its rough surface,

and sucking on it until it was red and swollen.

He didn't hesitate in doing the same, only he kissed me like he fucking meant it. Bit me like I'd committed far too many sins to count. Licked my flesh like he created me. And sucked as if I were the best tasting lollipop a land of desolation could offer.

My hands enjoyed their moment of glory, but my impatience was rising as was my thrumming desire to be filled by him. The scent of my arousal was growing as my pussy pulsed in need, my fingers fumbling with his zipper until I got the opportunity to slip into the pocket of his boxers and retrieve what I desired.

His veiny length was ready for me, thick and hard for me as precum glistened at the very tip. I'd smile in delight if I wasn't lost in the gratifying kiss he'd caught me in. The difference in Max compared to everyone I'd ever met, dated, or had some sort of relationship with was the maximum effort he put into executing each move.

He didn't kiss you for the thrill. He kissed you with everything he had. With devotion, lust, and ultimately, power. With the dominance he executed so flawlessly, and the tenderness he weaved into the sweeter kisses. It was so fucking balanced, and I didn't know how to grasp it all as I enjoyed the ride to the fullest.

The carriage was bumpier now, and it only prompted Max to shift gears as his hands gripped my waist and lifted me like I weighed nothing. I knew what had to be done, my hand already around his length and guiding the head to my glistening entrance.

He didn't seem to mind that I took an added moment to lube him up with my juices, the action only turning me on a few more notches simply because Max allowed it. I could feel his intrigue, and what I enjoyed more was the reality he didn't seem threatened by my need to have some sort of control in the realms of sexual jubilation.

He let me do what rushed into my mind at the prime moment, and boy did

it just make all of this more pleasurable.

The smoothness of the carriage's movement allowed me the chance to slowly lower myself onto his cock. When I reached the base of his shaft, I stilled and allowed the walls of my pussy to flutter around his thick rod as my body suffered.

*It felt far too good.*

He stretched me perfectly, while the overriding emotions of contentment swarmed between us. A moan left me as my eyes closed for a brief second, providing me another chance to grasp the calm before the blissful storm that would overtake my core and send me spiraling into oblivion.

"Never have I felt this."

My eyes opened enough to acknowledge how close my lips were to Max's, all while his lustful eyes were fixed on mine, allowing me to see the very truth of his words.

"To feel so...loved," he quietly confessed. "You barely know me, and yet you open your heart like a book begging to be read. You trust me when I feel as if I haven't earned your trust. Why?"

What an intriguing time to ask, but it was a question that I'd yet to review within myself.

*Why was it so easy to trust Maximus?*

"As royals, the one thing we're always reminded of is how Fate turns the clock in the direction it wishes. It isn't like a standard clock, one that moves clockwise for all eternity. With Fate, one minute you can go clockwise, the next minute, counter-clockwise. There's no determination on where Fate will lead you, but I always thought Fate was absolute," I whispered and moved close enough to lightly kiss him. "Until I was faced with rejection."

I paused to emphasize my point as a slight smile formed on my lips. The subject wasn't the reason why I smiled, but rather that the subject once again didn't ignite an array of emotions that left me feeling empty and shattered.

"After all the anarchy, I was forced to accept that this was a part of Fate's

plan, but how could I trust Fate when she allowed me to become broken?" The way his eyes filled with understanding only proved that he knew this feeling far too well. "I had to gain the strength to not just start over, but to trust in Fate again. To allow myself to be hopeful and believe that there was a bigger plan upon the horizon. I built that trust...and this...this entire fiasco makes me feel that I've achieved that level of undeniable trust, and that Fate decided to reward me with someone who would be beyond my expectations."

Wrapping my arms further around his neck, I pulled myself close to him and he closed the distance between us to give me an icy kiss that spiked warmth in return. Having his cock deep inside me while the carriage moved along a bumpy path only heightened this thrilling connection while allowing us to simmer in the emotional depth of this sensual moment.

"I know it's too early to say I love you...nor can I confidently say I know enough about you, but regardless of my past, I'm able to stand by the idea of trusting you, just like I'm able to enjoy this rollercoaster ride of learning all about you. Even if it means enjoying the ravishing drive of sexual exploration."

He allowed the lull of my words to hover between us, our eyes locked, our breathing slow, and our bodies riding out the various feelings coursing through us. My words did something to him, far more than I'd expected my truthful expressiveness to have over an Alpha like him.

There was something there, something that truly ripped a wound that never healed. There were layers of bandages attempting to hide what was still raw beneath, but it would take much more than this conversation to unwrap such a hidden injury.

*To allow someone like me the chance to aid in its recovery.*

As one arm remained hooked around me, the other moved so his hand could press upon my cheek. "I don't know what lies ahead...but I want to experience it with you. Regardless of the past, I want you to be treated like the true queen you are. Not in the realms of power, responsibility, or financial



luxury, but to be treated like a woman who deserves to witness the world at her feet."

His thumb stroked my cheek as he brushed his lips upon mine.

"I'll warn you here and now...if I let myself fully love you, Alexandra, there's no going back. I won't allow myself to plant seeds and then be forced to remove their roots for the sake of my sanity. By letting you in...you'll see sides of me that no one else has, like now...but you'll also see sides my enemies see before the strike of death. You'll see the sides that the media witnesses for the mere pleasure of entertainment and the masks I wear to ensure my pack and those I'm responsible for remain alive. I'm a jack of all trades, but most importantly, I'm an Alpha willing to do what needs to be done to protect what I treasure most. All I have to ask is...is that something you can live with?"

I understood the hidden meaning behind his request.

*Can you love me when I have to go to any length to protect what I cherish in this world where power talks, money forces people to listen, and royalty opens avenues no one would dare cross unless you know the secrets such heritages keep hidden within the darkness.*

"I can." It wasn't hard to agree with, and I made sure my eyes projected what I felt. He knew I was certain about my decision, and it sparked a true smile upon his lips.

"Then I'll make sure you reap the rewards of loving a man whom Fate has decided is better than the selfish bastard who was blind to see what a gem you are."

There were no other words that needed to be shared – it was a vow written upon our hearts.

That was when we returned to our current needs, our bodies tired of waiting as lust burst through us and we picked up right where we'd left off.

I expected my body to move first, years of initiation of this very deed a habit I never saw the reason to break, but what I hadn't expected was for Max

to lift me with him as he maneuvered himself to the floor in a flowing movement that went over my head until I registered the true fact that he was on the floor with me riding him.

His smirk in conjunction with my shocked, gawking face was simply the icing on the cake because I felt his motives deep down in those layers of masculine energy. This beast of a man was ready to fuck me here and now.

He encouraged the movement of my body as his hands that gripped the sides of my waist lifted me up and down in conjunction with the bumpy ride of the carriage. Surely, he had to have planned this for the bumps were rough, the hills were high, and the valleys of this path only let gravity accentuate the up and down ride on this man's cock.

"Oh fuck," I cursed because I'd never felt any cock go as deep inside me as Max's did. The way he knew exactly how to thrust himself, while somehow keeping the rhythm of this seemingly unpredictable carriage ride was beyond my comprehension.

He managed to do this while those icy orbs seemed to melt away and show the true depths of his desire for me. He watched the way my breasts bounced with the movement, listened to the way I moaned and panted, held me with a firm grip, yet not rough enough to leave imprints on my delicate flesh, and allowed me to be bombarded with the emotional pleasure

He groaned through clenched teeth as he began to move faster, fucking me hard and fast.

"So fucking hot," he huffed with a sense of pride. "Can you handle a magic trick?" he breathed.

I couldn't help but open my eyes and look at him as he kept the rapid pace.

"Do your worst," I urged him, and the way his eyes lit up only kindled the very trick he was contemplating. I gasped and almost came from the drop in temperature of his fucking cock, which made him chuckle dangerously while I watched him wildly.

"What...oh Goddess, ah." His cock felt like I'd shoved a damn popsicle in my pussy, and all she wanted to do was swallow him up. The heated walls squeezed his length like a dildo, the firm hardness only escalating the brewing pleasure building in my core.

He hammered into me with no remorse while I relished in the sensations of hot and cold - the thrusting of his frozen cock within the steamy, scorching walls of my pussy.

I couldn't dim my moans any longer, while my breaths were erratic. The gasps of every slight change of his angle, the tense grip of his hands upon my flesh, the encouraging groans and grunts coming from his mouth, the way my hands gripped his abs like they were handles... My nails dug into his flesh as I prepared for the incoming orgasm that was ready to shatter my core.

"You better be flexible, Alexandra," Max grunted at the last minute, and I couldn't grasp what he meant until he was already committing the deed - switching our position by pushing his body forward so my back was suddenly against the very wooden floor and he was thrusting with double the speed.

He went from rough to aggressive, and there was nothing I could do but brace for the explosion that hit me so hard, my eyes rolled back as I screamed, "MAX!"

Just like that, I came undone - my body pulsating with blissful tremors that simply couldn't be described with words.

Max was about to tip over the edge, and he kissed me right when the rush of his climax crushed through our connected senses.

"ALEXANDRA!" He grunted my name against my very lips as his body grew still when that last thrust triggered the explosive shots of his hot cum. Burst after burst, I was left to be filled by his release while we panted heavily on the floor of the carriage.

My body was limp, but I didn't care - my mind was too far gone within the threads of blissfulness. The carriage had seemed to slow, but it was a muffled sound that felt rather foreign in nature that made him grunt out loud.

**"Give us a minute,"** he huffed.

"Who are you talking to?" I inquired. "And that comment was internal, right?"

I hadn't opened my eyes yet, still fighting for breath, but my curiosity got the better of me.

"Simon," he breathed and surprisingly kissed the side of my neck. "Yes, I spoke that within my mind, but that was in the pack bond. Did you hear what he said?"

"No?" I made it sound like a question. "It was a muffled noise that sounded foreign," I breathed.

"Progress," he quietly noted. "Impressive, my Queen of Flames."

"That's a long title there," I commented.

"I prefer mate or Alexandra," he admitted. "Or queen, when we have company."

"I just realized they probably heard everything," It finally clicked in my mind that I hadn't thought in the slightest that this carriage's walls were as thin as paper, and they surely heard every moan, grunt, and scream.

*Am I embarrassed? No. Isn't that bad? Grayson surely would think I'm trying to rub in my new mate bond. Thank goodness Maeve isn't awake or she'd be lecturing me about how much she doesn't give a damn.*

"If it makes you feel better, Echo cloaked the walls a while ago. No one heard anything, but Simon can tell when I'm having sex."

"Wait, seriously?"

"My temperature spikes when I have sex," he revealed. "I'm a disservice to everyone when my temperature is too high, which is why Simon monitors it. I didn't normally have such a spike of heat in my system until I met a certain woman who enjoys her skin being as hot as the blazing fucking sun."

I didn't know why but it made me laugh a bit too hard, which felt weird as fuck with his cock still deep inside me. "Fuck. Remove that beast of a popsicle out of me!"

That made him splutter, and I laughed like a maniac while he attempted to recover.

"Really? A popsicle, of all things?"

"If you don't think that cold as fuck rod isn't the form of a popsicle, you haven't truly tried one, let alone enjoyed its sweet chill with your lips around its surface."

"Alright, popsicle expert," he concluded and worked his way out of me. We couldn't help but moan while shivering from the exhilarating tingles that went down our spines. "Fuck, we gotta fuck again later."

"Yes, Alpha," I purred in response, but was lost in his slamming lips not a second later.

Fuck, he was going to make me horny all over again as he pinned me down with his massive body and kissed me long and hard. Another muffled statement that felt more feminine in nature forced Max to break the kiss and hiss.

**"What?!"** He actually snapped because he was clearly irritated at the interruption. There was a lingering silence, but he answered, **"Tell him his senses better be on fucking point or I'm skinning him alive and placing him in front of the fireplace back home so whenever I want to fuck Alexis senseless, it'll be the perfect surface to do it on!"**

I felt bad for whoever he was threatening, but boy, the idea of being fucked next to the fireplace was rather inviting.

*Enough for my eyes to meet Max's.*

"That's what you actually want?" he inquired without me stating my obvious satisfaction with the potential idea.

"Minus the skinning of whomever is interrupting us," I admitted.

"Grayson senses trouble," he huffed, before making his way to his knees. He scooped me into his grasp and rose back up to place me on the seat. "We have to fuck in a carriage again."

"It felt like deja vu to me," I admitted.

"Me too," he said with a slight smirk.

"So..." I began. "We're really official, official?" I inquired as if I didn't feel the answer begin to rise within our bond.

"We're official, Alexandra," he reassured me. "Should I remind you after each sex session?"

"Maybe just the first few times," I considered with a tired smile. He noticed my exhaustion immediately, and he grasped my chin and lifted my head further up.

"Are you okay?"

"I am," I replied. "There's a heaviness in the air all of a sudden. It just hit me."

He frowned but let go of my chin to help me slip my shorts on and make sure my outfit covered the essentials.

"The shadow energy within these depths may be darker than expected," he finally answered.

The sudden hiss that kindled after Max zipped his pants drew our attention to the window where Echo, in kitten form, was hissing in warning.

"ALPHA MAXIMUS!" The call from outside pushed us into survival mode, but the words afterward were what brought a sense of dread. "APPROACHING AMBUSH!"

*Our feverish ride just went cold.*



## PROVEN WORTH AND A KNIGHT CLAIMS THY SWORD

**M**aximus rushed out first as the carriage was still moving - dropping to the ground with ease then walking swiftly to the nearest knight, who had to be the one who'd revealed the news. I stood on the edge of the step to take a view of what was ahead: a massive tower in the distance.

There was no doubt in my mind that something powerful was within that tower of stone, but it was rather obvious because of the clinging demons of darkness that climbed upon each other to try to reach the very top.

The top of the tower reminded me of a lighthouse, and whatever was being held in its grasp glowed marvellously with power that kept the demons at bay. They couldn't taint its shining light of orange and gold. The sight made my heart beat faster while my ears picked up on what was being exchanged.

"Alpha Maximus! The outskirts are surrounded. We also can't backtrack. We're sitting ducks."

"Set up Operation B. Any crew and knights not up for battle shall huddle around this carriage. We'll have Beta Yuki and Grayson create a big enough barrier to ensure their safety, but they won't be able to move until the wave arrives and brings them back to the surface. Emphasize that, for I won't take responsibility for anyone's death."



"Yes, Alpha!" the man replied.

"Also stress the idea of no shifting. The thickness of the energy here will push them to the brink of madness. If anyone goes against this, they will be killed for the safety of everyone else."

"Understood, Alpha!"

"Make haste!" Maximus urged. Seeing him in Alpha mode made me think of a commander. He wasn't projecting a full-on Alpha persona, but I think that was because these men weren't his pack. They were listening to him out of respect, which he'd surely earned thus far for them to listen to his every command.

He slowed his pace to match the carriages, our speed far slower than before now that we had to find the perfect place to stop. I expected Max to tell me to wait in the carriage, but he offered me his hand while maintaining his stride.

"Shall we try to avoid death, Mate?" he suggested with a charming smirk that made my heart skip a few beats. Those words had been said before, and for a brief second, the entire scene flashed before my eyes as spinning black whirlwinds spun behind the woman in a delicate fabric that danced in fury.

*"**Shall we try and avoid death, Mate?**" the feminine voice inquired with a warmth that ignited a flame within my chest.*

The image was gone like that, and it simply encouraged me to smile as I laid my hand in his and allowed him to tug me forward. I was in his grasp the next second, and how extravagant I would have looked to everyone around.

Nevertheless, the move definitely caught some eyes as he lowered me gracefully without missing a single step, which allowed me to sync my stride with his as I landed upon the ground.

His hand reached for mine, and he wrapped those large fingers of his around mine and walked by my side like we were equals. To everyone else, it may have meant nothing, but to me, it was huge.

*I wasn't just his Luna. I was an equal that should be given the same*

*respect as him.*

"Maew!" Echo declared as he sat upon my shoulder. We were approaching the very front of the carriage line while crew members and knights scurried to get into position. I looked up to see Rafael as he landed flawlessly and fell right into stride with Max and me.

"Edwin confirmed we're surrounded," he began. "But Grayson states there's a wave approaching."

Glancing at my wolf tattoo, I noticed how close it was to being completely colored with pink, but that small percentage of peach could be anything from a few minutes to far too much time in a situation that could potentially cost our lives.

"We need to survive until then," I voiced, but I worried about the crew hovering around the carriage in the middle while the strongest of us were in the front. "Alpha Maximus."

His hand slightly squeezed mine while his harsh eyes diverted from the path before us to meet my orange orbs. I felt like he didn't approve of me using such formalities, but we were about to head into some sort of brawl, which meant everyone had to mentally acknowledge who the leaders were in this pack.

*Max being one of them.*

"As much as the carriage plan is a good call, I'm worried about the closing in of the storm. If we're truly surrounded, it would only make sense to group everyone together so we have eyes on them."

From the flicker in his eyes, he was taking my words into consideration. He swiftly nodded and in less than ten seconds, Beta Yuki and Beta Simon were approaching us.

"Yes, Alpha Maximus," they replied in haste.

"Gather everyone to the front. Alexis pointed out that we're already surrounded so having the weakest near the middle could potentially make them the perfect target. Grayson should be able to make a barrier big enough

to hold all of us, but if he's struggling, help him out, Beta Yuki."

"Yes, Alpha!" Beta Yuki promptly replied.

"Beta Simon, you'll aid in offense with Rafael, Edwin, Alpha Surge, Alpha Rouge, and myself," Max continued.

"Understood, Alpha," he answered.

"Get to it."

The Betas were gone in a flash and Rafael looked at me. "Edwin and I will ensure everyone gets to the front."

"Thank you," I praised. "Be quick. I don't think we have much time."

The heaviness in the air was just too thick, and that was a definite bad sign. The thicker the atmosphere, the more powerful the shadows became, and that left their competition weak, delirious, and suffocating for life.

We could already see the group forming and growing as we neared the fortress of armed knights that made a solid circle around those who were more vulnerable. Grayson was already in the middle, which proved he was taking all of this seriously as he moved his arms and chanted words that I couldn't decipher from here.

Max suddenly stopped, forcing me to stop with him. He moved to stand in front of me, and I looked up to see his conflicted eyes as he took me in.

*Here we go.*

"If you're about to start a lecture on how you can't afford to lose me and you want to keep me from harm's way, blah, blah, blah, weak woman bullshit, I don't want to hear any of-"

He tugged me right into his massive frame, and before I could counter - *or react, for that matter* - I felt the tender, cold touch of his lips against my forehead.

My eyes widened at the sweet move of affection, his chilled press sending waves of calm while empowering me in a way I'd never felt before. It was like he was sending energy through me. It was cold in nature as it moved from my head downward, but by the time it reached the core of my chest, it

burned with an intensity that made me feel like a firecracker ready to explode.

Even as his lips left my flesh, he remained still to emphasize what he'd done, our eyes locking onto one another as we were lost in the various emotions thrumming between us.

His worry was obvious, as was his slight excitement for what was to come. He wanted to protect me, shield his queen from the chaos of the world, but he knew I wouldn't allow myself to rely on him unless it was a last resort.

The fact that he knew such and allowed himself to emotionally understand with no word of discouragement proved not just his maturity, but his confidence in me. As I'd said before, I never wanted to be some damsel in distress, and in all seriousness, I knew there was something I could do to aid the situation if it got a whole lot worse.

*Those years of training for the chance of wars weren't just for show.*

"I won't gatekeep you," he assured me. "But I want you to at least be careful. You've...become important to me, and that makes you a weakness against me. However, in reality, you are my equal, and in this approaching battle, I'll treat you the same way as I treat Alpha Rogue and Alpha Surge. You will have independence in your decisions, but this will become a team effort so I need you to cooperate with me when you can. Do you understand, Alpha Alexis?"

The way I smiled in return encouraged him to replicate the expression on his face that lit up with pride. This man, who I felt was still a stranger to me, held a well of hope when it came to me that I still couldn't quite grasp. My inability to comprehend didn't diminish, but I allowed myself to accept that it didn't matter.

*Trust in fate, Alexandra.*

The thought only made me realize I couldn't sense Maeve.

"I understand," I finally answered but couldn't fight the pout that graced my lips. "I can't feel Maeve."

His lips formed a solid line and he seemed to be distant as his gaze seemed far away. It was like he was searching, his eyes darting aimlessly until he frowned.

"Neither can I feel Adam," he grumbled. "This is no doubt a trap. We can't shift."

With a tug of my hand, we were suddenly running to the group. It got their attention immediately as the knights parted to give us access to the inner circle. Everyone was present - Grayson, Edwin, Rafael, Beta Simon, Beta Yuki, Alpha Surge, and Alpha Rogue.

"We won't be able to shift at all," Max announced with a stern voice. "The shadows are closing in and the storm is only going to make things worse."

"Can't we remain in the barrier until the wave?" Beta Simon suggested. "Grayson's barrier is strong enough to keep us safe and Beta Yuki can solidify it."

"Grayson?" I got his attention, hoping he'd justify whether his barrier could give us a fighting shot. From the conflicted expression in the lines of exhaustion seeping into his face, I knew he was already reaching his limit.

"I can hold it for a few minutes, but this will only aid against physical onslaughts," he revealed. "If the tension in the air gets any worse, I don't think I can manage to maintain enough concentration to keep the barrier up."

His honesty had us exchanging wary looks, but there was no time for more debate as an eerie howling sound pierced the air.

The way my skin began to prickle with goosebumps revealed the fearsome power that sound of echoing force had. I cursed as the memories of dealing with this occurrence before flooded my mind. My gaze looked for Edwin. He was already attempting to cast some sort of spell that shot out to wrap around myself, Maximus, Alpha Surge, and Alpha Rogue.

"What is your commander doing?" Alpha Surge demanded, but the piercing sound of howls doubled in power - forcing us to see what it was

beginning to do to everyone else around us.

"Grayson!" Raf called out and reached him with a slap of his wings to catch him before his head hit the ground. "Shit! What the..." he tried to continue, but he was next to drop. His wings retracted into his back before he groaned and passed right out.

"Simon! Yuki!" Max called out to his Betas, but they were next to groan and try to fight the haze of power taking over their bodies. Neither stood a chance as they dropped to their knees. Yuki struggled to get up, but her hands fell to the earth before she tried to get up once more.

"So...sleepy," she huffed in annoyance, her eyes finally closing as she fell to the side.

Beta Simon was struggling to remain conscious, his hair of flames becoming weaker and weaker as he crawled over and put a protective hand over Yuki. In seconds, he was knocked out as well.

It triggered a wave as crew members gasped and groaned, all of them collapsing onto the ground like a mist of death was plaguing every one of them. We watched in horror before my eyes locked onto Edwin's as I realized he was the last one standing but was indeed struggling to finish the very spell he'd started.

***"Protect what's precious, mute the sounds of rest. May those cloaked with...the shadows be given mercy from the hands of death. Es...hano Ve Lu!"***

He performed the final incantation symbol with his hands, completing the spell that wrapped around us like a protective orb and began to close in until it was like our skin was covered by the protective layer of magic.

Edwin's eyes drooped at that moment, and I rushed to catch him in my arms as he caved over. Max had followed, helping me catch and lower him to the ground before I noticed how slow his heartbeat was.

*Shit. Shit. Shit.*

I quickly moved before anyone else could say anything, checking their

pulses and noticing the same thing.

"They're all going to die if we don't do something to stop the spell's progress," I announced and spun around to face the three remaining Alphas. "I've dealt with this before. The Plague Song is what Darkling wolves use against their prey. They put you to sleep and you die. Once everyone is dead, they reveal their true forms and come to feast on the remains until there are just bones. If your soul doesn't cross over in time, they take everything, including the magic you once possessed."

That had Max cursing before he urged me to come to his side. "Alexis, come back here."

I decided to obey because I could sense the shift in the air. Something was here, or at least, someone with far more power than any creature in this wave was in the background.

*Observing how we'd survive this. Hoping to watch our approaching downfall.*

When I reached him, Richard and Alpha Surge moved into a triangle formation with Maximus, me in the center.

"You have a plan, I'm assuming," Alpha Surge huffed.

"I do but it leaves me immobile." Max didn't sound too happy about that. "It'll ensure they stay alive, but if push comes to shove, I won't be able to physically protect us from a gang attack."

"I can stay as backup," Richard encouraged. "The approaching storm is making the winds pick up. It gives me the advantage of making a protective barrier strong enough to withstand any physical attacks, but we'll be sitting ducks as you stated."

"Better than everyone else being dead," Alpha Surge huffed.

"It shouldn't be long before the wave is here," I announced, my eyes once again taking in my tattoo, which was nearly full. "I'm good with long-range attacks and I'm sure Alpha Surge could assist with short-range if things get messy. Let's execute things before some of the weaker crewmates perish," I

urged.

They respected my order. Max took a few deep inhales before he raised his hand up to summon the same brilliant sword from before. It manifested in his grasp, the hilt of silver glowing light blue before the blade began to emit intense waves of frosted mist, reminding me of winter mornings and the cloudy chill that descended upon the city.

He raised it up to the sky, chanting various words at a quick pace. His hair began to levitate, the spikes of power growing stronger and stronger with each pulse from his massive frame summoning my utmost attention.

With a grunt, he slammed the sword downward - piercing the black soil surface and igniting the spread of ice that moved across the surface beneath the individuals. Within a flash, we were boxed in: walls of water shot out of the ground and crystalized into walls of transparent ice.

Above us, a dome of glittering silver came to life, further shielding us from the heavy energy that sought to consume our consciousnesses.

Richard took that moment to clap his hands together, and the wind around us rose with a swift gracefulness that danced around our frames and expanded until glittering teal energy brushed along everyone's bodies before outlining the protective shelter that reminded me of an ice castle.

"How long can you both keep this up for?" I inquired while giving myself a moment to breathe the air that felt as pure as it had been since landing in this voided space. It felt good but it was giving me a headache from the sudden switch.

"As long as neither of us moves much, we'll be fine for a good while," Max answered, though his eyes were locked onto the tower. I followed his gaze, as did Alpha Surge, who moved with the intention of scanning our surroundings.

"They won't come to us unless they know we're dead," Alpha Surge emphasized. "They probably react to the scent of death."

"That's a good thing for now," I muttered, but I knew there was more to



this growing problem. "Alpha Maximus? What's wrong?"

His silence was beginning to creep me out because I felt like something heavy was on his mind. It was a numb sensation, nagging at us again and again.

"The sword." Richard was the one to answer, and I moved around Max to face Richard as he continued to remain in place on the side. "I've seen Maximus act like this once before. It's when he acquired the sword he's using."

"Alpha Maximus's sword is special?" I hastily asked.

"Alpha Maximus carries the *Sword of Royale Givre*," Richard revealed. "And that sword in that tower is definitely the counterpart."

"Sword of Royale Flamme. The one the Senator is desperate to retrieve before this wave ends," Alpha Surge muttered.

"Do you think that's why this trap was all set up? To allow the creatures to be distracted by eating our corpses, which would provide the grand opportunity to claim it without much problem?" I summarized.

"Good plan on his part," Richard muttered.

"We need to get that sword," Alpha Surge stressed. "The sword is connected to Alpha Maximus's weapon. If it gets into the Senator's grasp, he could potentially be able to force us into his corner."

"Why?" I had to ask the prime question, since I knew nothing about these swords other than what I'd learned before Eric confronted me.

"Fire and ice. They're opposite, but fire is far more powerful than you'd think. The Dark Senator is known to have the ability to use dark flames. It's a technique only a few Inferno wolves from ancient times were able to conjure, but if he gets this sword, we'll be fucked. The sword's base element is fire. Partner such a weapon with someone who can command flames of darkness, and..."

"You won't be able to get it, Surge," Richard huffed in seriousness. "Your base element is water. It'll destroy you if you attempt to grasp it, let alone get

through that mass of creatures."

"Are you trying to insult me, Richard? Because this ain't the time."

"Keep your pride on a shelf," Richard countered. "This isn't about insults! It's reality. Alexis is a prime target the Senator may wish to kidnap. Don't try to act blind and say you can't sense the eyes upon us."

*I'm not the only one who sensed it.*

"No matter who's observing us, I can get that sword. Alexis wouldn't need to lift a damn finger. Just stay here like a good woman and let the men handle things."

The way my eye twitched as I glared daggers at him only made him huff and attempt to stand taller while his Alpha energy brewed into action.

"You're a child in this game, Alexis. Without our wolves to back us up, you're just like any other human."

"Then what does that make you?" I countered. He chuckled as if I'd said something utterly amusing as he stretched his arms and got prepared to run forward.

"I'm going to be our savior out of here," he vowed. "Then you'll have no choice but to bow to us superiors who've been in this game far longer than you've been crowned. Or at least, were crowned."

"Surge!" Richard snapped in rage, but he huffed and began to run forward, leaving me to stand there with a blank expression on my face.

"Don't listen to his foolish banter, Alexis," Richard urged, but I knew he sensed the heat leaking off my flesh. His words shouldn't have speared those wounds I thought were bandaged tightly, nor should they have made me clench my fists in unconquerable anger.

If Maeve were present, she'd rip him a new one, and yet the reminder that she wasn't only emphasized the hollowness in my unconsciousness.

It forced me to remember how useless I was. *Aside from my magic, what else can I do to aid in situations like these?*

Maximus grunted before he muttered, "Stop thinking like that,

Alexandra."

I tugged my eyes away to meet his stern ones that were observing me. I knew he couldn't move and was fighting the tugging force of the counterpart sword waiting to be claimed, but he fought against those chains just to try to pull me out of my internal demise.

"Surge can go fuck himself. You...won't bow to anyone. We're in a tricky situation and you're just as valuable as that sword, if not more. To me, you're not only worthy but are powerful with or without your wolf present. Don't let his distasteful remarks wound you. Our circumstances are tight, but you're stronger than that, my queen."

This man was carrying the burden of keeping this entire expedition crew alive, fighting the pulls of a sword that matched his, and still cared enough to comfort me over a few harsh words.

*Any more love and this man is going to force me to fall for him.*

Maybe I'd already done exactly that.

"ARGH!"

Our attention darted forward, the scene unraveling before our eyes as Alpha Surge got caught in some sort of black tar. It stuck to the bottom of his shoes, forcing him to unlace the black threads and swiftly jump out of the soles to race forward.

He didn't make it much further as the same black tar crept to the surface of the ash ground. It reminded me of cement, cloaking his feet and forcing him to slow down until he couldn't move a single step.

"I'm only getting started!" he announced and clapped his hands together. They glowed vibrant blue that cloaked his fists and spread across his flesh. Various incantations appeared upon his skin, triggering tiny beads of water that began to lift from the ground's surface and float in the air.

The beads of water multiplied, coming together until a stream of water wrapped around him and crashed at his feet in an attempt to wash the thick black liquid away. It did absolutely nothing - *or so I thought.*

Thin, black vines shot out of the ground, as if the retrieved water had suddenly prompted their ability to grow and escape, wrapping around Alpha Surge's ankles, wrists, waist, and neck.

"Fuck," Max cursed and Richard muttered an array of curses in a different language.

"If he dies here, we'll be in serious shit," he grunted.

"Shit! The creatures noticed!" I exclaimed. We were all forced to watch as the demons on the bottom of the tower began to charge forward like black ants. The only difference was these creatures were nothing close to harmless.

Their bodies oozed with a murky substance similar to the tar, while their bodies were disproportioned and simply disgusting to look at. Their eyes of red were all on Alpha Surge, and he couldn't hide his fear in the slightest.

My nostrils flared at the scent of it. We were so far away from him, so I could only imagine the immense excitement these creatures were feeling now that they had a new, appetizing prey to feast on.

The explosive spark of orange made the creatures stop at their tracks, and I knew everyone's attention was on the firework show happening at the top of the tower. The spike of various shades of orange, gold, red, and pink created the perfect distraction as my brain went into motion.

"Echo!" I called to the orb of black. I saw his kitten form appear in a poof of black smoke.

"Alexandra," Max's voice warned. I was sure he was already getting a grasp of my plan. "Don't go out there."

"I can't make fireworks forever, Maximus," I hissed. "Alpha Surge can't die. Don't you think I know what happens when a royal dies on an expedition? They're going to think you guys plotted all of this and you could be executed! Eric's actions are only a bonus in pointing the proper fingers at the assumed culprit."

He knew I had a point, and I wasn't going to wait for him to try to talk me out of what I was going to do. "Echo! Shift into a horse!"

"Maew!" Echo didn't even hesitate as his body grew big in shape - the kitten image fading as his body expanded and began forming the shape of a large horse. By the time he'd finished his transformation, he was stomping his hooves and shaking his head in impatience.

With a huff, his head turned to look my way, his long hair of glittering neon pink pretty close to my hair shade. His pink jewels looked into my orange ones as I gave him a confident smile and pressed my hands against the sides of his face.

Closing my eyes for a moment, I pressed my forehead against his.

"I know we just met and I haven't earned your loyalty, but please be my strength and help me reach that tower."

"Neigh!" he replied and pressed his head back against mine, making me smile in delight as I opened my eyes.

"The moment we get close, I'm gonna put on a show. Turn back and help Alpha Surge back here. Can you do that?"

"NEIGH!" he said louder in encouragement, and without delay moved back from my grasp to kneel down on all fours. The emotions that welled at his absolute trust in my actions forced me to remember the years of my youth - *the animals who protected the kingdom and always listened to every silly command I asked.*

I pushed away from the negative thoughts of how I'd let them down without the presence of Maeve to support me. I wouldn't fail this time around. Regardless of the past, I was a new being of strength.

*One who was strong, vigilant, and faithful. No blood would be shed in my presence.*

I knew whoever was observing us would wish to see the sign of royalty that sat upon my head - to ensure I was the one that should have fallen at their very hands years ago, but I kept my crown hidden from the world.

*I didn't need it to be visibly seen to feel the thrumming weight it carried.*

***You are a beacon of flames, child. Let all those who oppose thee feel thy***

***burn.***

The words of wisdom held haunting energy to them as they echoed into my mind, but their intentions of pushing me forward were what urged me to get on Echo and grip the pink reins that blinked into existence while a pink saddle appeared beneath me.

"Alexandra." Max didn't hide his pain and that was what forced me to look back at him as his eyes were full of actual worry. There was that helplessness, an emotion I'd never think would flash within his eyes of frigid beauty.

I bet he was like me, forced to be fierce in a world that would only bow down to you if you displayed an emotionless persona. The world knew him as cold, but in this bubble of protection, it was just those who he trusted with his life and he feared I was about to lose mine.

Echo turned until my left side was parallel to Max's front side, and without thinking, I leaned as far to the side as I could until my lips laid upon his. The way those blue jewels widened in surprise was compared to the flood of emotional tyranny that assaulted every nerve within my body.

*Trust me.*

The thought was so tender, and I wondered if I'd properly sent the simple request through our connective bond. I pulled right back as I corrected my posture on Echo and turned my attention to Richard.

He was still in his spot, but he turned his head enough to see me.

"Protect Maximus by any means, Richard," I whispered.

"You have my word, Your Majesty," he vowed.

That was all I needed to hear to whip the reigns and encourage Echo to charge forward. He ran at full speed, and I already began to look deep within myself, noticing the lined-up vials of power. I hadn't opened one without Maeve's presence. Even if she was sleeping within my subconscious, at least she was "present" when I had to make these crucial decisions.

I'd already used up two, and if I used a third one and this wave extended

further, we'd be in big trouble, but I guess it would be better to be depleted than dead.

There was no more time to think as I closed off that section in my mind and opened the gates to my instincts. With the pop of the vial, my magic overpowered my senses - forcing me to close my eyes briefly as I let go of the reins and outstretched my arms to the side.

***"Allow me to be your puppeteer as we burn a pathway towards the realms of victory."***

My eyes shot open and the world of darkness blossomed into an energetic wonderland of energies and heightened colors. Flames burst out of me and danced around us - cloaking the hooves of Echo's legs and leaving a trail of fire as we raced towards Alpha Surge.

He looked over his shoulder as Echo cried out in warning, his eyes of crippling fear morphing into shock before he tugged on the vines to try to run from the approaching collision.

"Echo!" I ordered, and with a cry of power, Echo pushed off the ground and soared over Alpha Surge. Amber flakes of the flames rained down on Alpha Surge, and I knew my plot would come to life when Echo raced back to retrieve him.

The landing was smooth as we jerked forward and charged towards the eerie creatures. Their attention sluggishly moved towards us, and that was the cue I needed.

Letting go of the reins, I pressed hands upon the surface of the saddle - lifting my body so my feet rested upon the surface. I moved slowly to ensure my balance was on point, all while the flames that danced around us in a spiraling motion began to conjure around my arms and move as I changed my stance.

As I held a bow and arrow in my hand, I allowed my back to straighten as I tilted my chin upright. This move required perfection, but more importantly, it needed all my focus.

*You will never perfect this Alexandra! As heir of this kingdom, error is not an option.*

*Without perfection, there is only chaos. Do you think this is but a game? Mistake after mistake will not allow you to rule such land of flames, Princess. You disappoint me, Princess. I don't understand how Edwin can continue to follow your lead.*

The words of critiques from those royal advisors of my youth trickled into my mind, and I knew it was the influence of the clouded atmosphere as dark thoughts rampaged through my subconscious and brought the darkest memories to the forefront.

*She's too kind to rule.*

*She's still but a kid. Our queen may have been the same age, but she was nowhere close to as naive and weak.*

*Edwin does everything with the assistance of Rafael. She will fail us in one day of ruling.*

*It's only because of her birthright that she was allowed to carry the crown. Why should we be ruled by a child who can't truly summon the Inferno beasts of our Creator?*

*She's useless.*

*Weak. Stupid. A disgrace to our royal heritage.*

*She'll get us all killed.*

*Bow to us superiors who've been in this game far longer than you've been crowned. Or at least, were crowned.*

***I reject you.***

My eyes filled with tears as I gasped and fought for breath. I was still frozen in my spot, and Echo was far too close for my own comfort as he



continued at full speed, but I struggled to press the button in my mind and let myself go.

*The negativity was winning, and I feared accepting the growing chance of failure.*

***"Kindness doesn't mean you're foolish."***

My eyes widened at the soft sound of Maximus's voice. It was so far away, and I could barely hear it, but his words carried on. ***"You're brave. Powerful. A force to be reckoned with. Be our firecracker, Alexis. Ignore the darkness and seek the light. See the burning flame begging to be retrieved by the only person who can grasp her hilt. You."***

My eyes lifted up to the top of the tower, taking in the tranquil beauty of the warm light that seemed to grow brighter with my attention.

The words of hate faded away, and I caught onto Maximus's last words as the connection seemed to cut off.

***"I accept you."***

Acceptance. That was all I ever wanted at the end of the day. To be accepted by those who said they loved me, who cherished my existence and didn't wish for me to be someone I simply wasn't.

Even if one person truly accepted me for who I was, I could survive. I would prevail and become someone beyond their negative notions and unachievable expectations.

*They would be forced to accept that I've grown, changed, and have become someone of my own power.*

Maeve may not be present, but it wasn't like she'd disappeared for eternity. She was there, her power waiting to be unlocked from captivity. It was my turn to be a savior. Not to just her, but everyone here who fell victim to this unexpected ploy.

*To get us out of this trap and prove to the observer that we deserved to be feared.*

Just like that, my magic exploded with rejuvenated strive, encouraging

me to put my thoughts into action as the bow of flames burst into my grasp while the arrow of shadows created the inky weapon that was about to blend with our enemy.

Pulling upon it, I aimed for the middle and readied to fire.

"I'll show you," I whispered as those tears that had been pooling in my eyes fell down my cheeks - only to evaporate in steam from the sheer level of my burning temperature. "I'll show you all."

I let go of the arrow and watched it soar towards my target. At the last second, I made my striking move as I squatted to give myself some leverage before pushing off the saddle entirely.

"ECHO! Retreat to Alpha Surge!" I called out as I began to do a backflip.

"NEIGH!" Echo made a sharp turn and sped off in time to avoid the explosion that went off before us. My height was absolutely perfect as I avoided the limbs of these dark creatures that flew in all directions - all while my eyes caught onto Echo as he trailed back on the flaming path we'd created.

I mentally triggered the flaming path's purpose - walls of orange flames shooting upward and destroying anything shadow-related, which included the very vines that held Alpha Surge.

There was no need to witness Echo's return because it was time for me to set my next move in motion as my body began to fall downward.

The explosive flames had made the perfect environment for someone who could manipulate such a lethal element. My hands shot outward as my eyes narrowed in concentration.

**"FLAMANDA STAIRLOVÉ!"** This spell was far harder than it sounded, but I had the magic and adrenaline to push it through as the diminishing flames that fought to disintegrate the remains of shadow creatures awakened once more.

They shot upwards, the beginning pillars lacking in strength compared to the ones that were further up towards the tower. It wouldn't stop me from my

goal as I landed upon the first platform and began to run up the flaming steps.

I sprinted like this was an Olympic sport, my breaths short and uneven as I pushed my body hard. Creatures fought to take me down as I ran up the burning stairs that already began to collapse behind me, but my speed versus their sluggish nature was no match.

When I got to the final step, I had no choice but to jump because the thickness of demons gathered at that specific spot was too much for me to make a close-range move against them. Soaring through the air, I crossed my arms around me - hugging myself as flames pierced out of my flesh the moment multiple demons tackled into me.

Even from this distance, I heard the cries of my name, but I could only focus on surviving as my body crashed through glass and landed upon the cement floor. I scrambled, pushed, shoved, and screamed as I shot out aftershocks of flames that got some demons off me.

There was no time to look around as I'd given these creatures an opening and in seconds, this tiny space of tranquility would be swarming with greedy demons that only wanted the pretty, sparkling light that held centuries' worth of magic.

No time to think. No time to breathe. No time to acknowledge the man in black that stood in wait for me to move. No fucking time to stop myself from leaping for the hilt of the sword when there was the unexpected pull of a trigger.

*There was no time to die.*



## RETURN TO THE SURFACE AND DEADLY REMINDER

~**M**AXIMUS~

"ALEXANDRA!" Her name escaped my lips before I could stop it as the persona I'd built for my own protection crumbled at the painful strikes that shot through me.

I didn't realize I was on my knees until Alpha Rogue was shaking me to snap out of it, but how could I simply pull out of this volcanic explosion of pain, fear, agony, and my own blazing anger that was about to melt away every block of patience within me?

Never had I endured this level of phantom pain. It felt as if bullets rushed through my body, piercing me like a dartboard while sharp blades tore at my flesh and organs. I could feel every desperate move Alexandra made the moment she crashed into the tower's glass surface, colliding with the stone ground as demons of various sizes fought to pull her down.

The heightened fight-or-flight mode overpowered logical thinking, and maybe that was exactly why she didn't sense the person waiting for her with a weapon in their grasp. I couldn't recognize the image that flickered in my mind - a second before the loud ringing of bullets being fired triggered memories of the surface world.

I was forced to acknowledge the possibility of my old enemies seeking to destroy me on this side of our world, but it felt too convenient for them to

interfere in a situation as vulnerable as this.

*Unless Eric was already working on his act of revenge...*

It took more shakes before an actual slap to my cheek brought me out of the spiraling destruction happening within my consciousness. My eyes locked on Alpha Rogue's wild ones, worry consuming them as they observed me carefully.

His lips were moving but my ears were still ringing from the intense beat of my blood. There were no words to describe how I felt right now, but my attention immediately returned to the priority of my body's meltdown, my eyes moving past Alpha Rogue's to see the tower that was cloaked in nothing but darkness.

The way my heart dropped would have triggered a deadly howl if Adam wasn't suppressed, but it didn't stop the outrage of my thrumming magic that sought an outlet.

Alpha Rogue suddenly cursed, and a grunt followed by words I barely grasped reached my ears, "Echo! Protect everyone from the ice!"

Whatever was going on around me could have contributed to the intense drop of temperature, but my focus was all on the tower of darkness. I watched as it pulsed with sparks of black and bolts that struck down from the grey cloudy sky.

This world could fall into complete darkness and it wouldn't stop me as I took a daunting step forward. The cracking sound similar to two glaciers brushing against each other vibrated around me, each step that followed doing the same as my inhaled delivered chilly air into my lungs and I released exhaled of mist.

My body vibrated with rage, my hands clenched, as I fought with my very self. Why did I have to act like a weakling in these realms all for this expedition? To humble myself to acquire what the Dark Senator was desperate for?

This mission should have never delivered more than what was predicted,

and yet I was ambushed by a woman who took my breath away. A queen who marked my body, overtook my mind, and claimed my heart without realizing it.

My past relationship was never like this. I'd never felt so alive. I wanted to dedicate every minute to this woman. To discover the chapters of her past and read her thoroughly so I'd know how to be the best mate to a woman of such caliber.

I was used to submissive woman. Individuals who whimpered when you spoke too loudly or bowed their head when you simply looked their way. Only one other woman had been more dominant than the rest, but she was a Pandora's box filled with so many secrets, I'd gotten tricked by a personality that was nothing close to her true, hidden self.

Finally, someone who lit my world. Someone who made me do things I wouldn't mentally dare try, and all of a sudden, she'd slipped away like a maiden being forced to return to her hidden world of perfection.

*Leaving the knight who fell in love with her behind.*

I shook my head and let a out grunt, unable to truly accept that this was it. She couldn't have succumbed to the darkness, but then again, could I blame her? There were too many obstacles against her.

The demons that congregated along that tall tower, the heavy energy that disabled us from using our wolves, the onslaught of challenges we'd already faced to reach this far, and the mysterious enemy hidden in the darkness ready to fill the woman I may have just fallen hard for with bullets were almost impossible to overcome.

*Fuck.*

I had to calm down, and yet my breathing was erratic, my thought process clouded by murderous intent, and if I didn't walk any faster, I'd completely lose it.

*She was my queen and I let her waltz onto the battlefield alone.*

That tiny voice of logic wanted to scream through the immense fog of

self-hatred and remind me that I'd held back for the sake of keeping our entire expedition crew alive, but the lives of many wasn't equivalent to her.

*The world could crumble before my feet and it wouldn't be comparable to the loss of this woman.*

This heaviness felt ancient, the pain as if I'd been struck by various swords that pierced through my entire body to ensure my heart felt every single strand of pain. The sense of devastation could kill, but my body, mind, and soul wouldn't allow me to commit such a cowardly move.

*I would immediately seek revenge.*

To plague the world with eternal slumber for allowing such a circumstance to transpire. I'd blame everyone but myself, and it would cost more than just my royal name. It was clear through my chaotic thought process that I'd shed the blood of my own over the loss of the woman I'd finally found after years of searching.

*Years of wondering, dreams of hope, prayers begging to bring a woman who'd complete me.*

No way could she be gone when I'd worked so hard to finally be drawn to her.

I stopped because someone was in front of me and their energy was attempting to calm my blind rage. I almost wanted to laugh because the element was nothing in comparison to my ice force. In fact, it was laughable because the very element merely encouraged my ability.

"Maximus! Snap out of it."

I stopped momentarily to lower my gaze to the man before me, and no matter his attempt to speak sense to me with his moving lips, his words went over my head while I glared down at him. He was struggling to compete against the fluctuating energy that was oozing out of me in waves, but he surprisingly stood his ground, which was rather "cute".

My care for my image in these realms was over with, and it was time for this Alpha to see that I was respected for a reason.



*That I am one of the sons of Alpha Atlas.*

"Dammit, Maximus! Snap out of this! You'll get everyone killed!" Alpha Surge snapped at me.

"And whose fault would that be?" My voice was monotone in nature, the sound so deep with venomous intent that I watched goosebumps trickle along Alpha Surge's arms as he quivered in dread.

If only he could get a taste of the hollowness fighting to swallow me whole. To enjoy being mocked for years as an Alpha and future ruler without a mate while trying to mend a shattered heart that never wished to love again.

Our Goddess above had mercy on my soul and after all the wondering, praying, begging to be loved by someone who could understand a damn speck of me, that being was thrown into my arms.

*And I allowed her to ride towards her death.*

The beating urge to kill this man before me began to grow. To commit the very deed my Queen of Flames wished me to avoid for the sake of my name. It wouldn't matter if I allowed myself to fuck up my entire future and cloak my hands in this man's blood, for what future would I have left?

*I can't take the mockery anymore. The laughter in the halls, the whispers in hidden places, the shadows watching my every move, and the royal secrets I was forced to carry flawlessly in a world that only wished for my survival when it benefitted everyone else in my life.*

I couldn't tell if I was crying, but what I could sense was the snowflakes raining down from the sky. It felt like the beginning of the end, those raining flakes of innocence would begin to further blossom into a blizzard no one would survive.

It felt like it would be the perfect resting place, and I felt a pulsing sensation in my mind that urged me to do exactly that. The remnants of power that sought for the revenge we wholeheartedly desired wished for me to execute this deed.

*I'm ready to do that...even if it makes me into a villain.*

Was that the length I was willing to go for a woman I'd only enjoyed a taste of? Was I ready to taint this crown hidden upon my head with the blood of the innocent because a queen who'd been rejected by many perished while being a selfless sacrificial lamb? Was she worth giving up everything I'd worked endlessly to achieve?

***Yes. She's worth losing it all...even if it lands me in an eternal pit of hell.***

I smiled at my decision as the prickling droplets coming from my eyes rolled down my cheeks. The two tears would be my first and last as my eyes darkened and I focused on my first target before my eyes.

Alpha Surge's eyes widened as he put his hands up protectively, but I could see it in his eyes, enjoying the scent of fear. He always tried to project what a powerful fucker he was. To him, I was but a boy born into royalty and given a throne because of the directional birthright I had no control over.

Surely I knew nothing about suffering. Never experienced a bad day in my life. I was fed not with a silver spoon, but one of gold with individually picked crystals that glimmered like iridescent diamonds, and my power was nothing but for show.

He could see me now. The real me without my wolf backing me up. This was the me I got to let my enemies witness before I slit their throats and destroyed their empires with a single snap of my fingers. He finally got to see the real me of whom very few survived.

*Only he wouldn't survive any longer.*

"Maximus, wait!"

It wasn't the call from Richard that stopped me from finishing my intentions, but the blast of light that shot into the air from the horizon. I expected to see the wall of shimmering light that would steal us from this desolate dimension, but the single beam of light shot into the air from the tower covered in demons.

The thin light of orange was delicate at first, like the solid beam you'd

envision when a soul was lifted upward to meet their Goddess in the land of blissful paradise, but we watched as it began to flicker and expand - growing stronger with every ticking second.

The demons were forced to pull back as if the light were far too intense for them to be near, but then the light flickered again, and this time around, it expanded with a bang big enough to shake the earth beneath our feet and vanquish every single demon clinging to that tower for life.

My eyes widened and I was frozen in place, watching the sparkling show of flaming chaos explode a third time, wiping out the remnants of whatever still existed. The after wave was rushing towards us before I could grasp it, and the intense heat it delivered was like a wave in the midst of summer colliding into the sheer chill of the coldest day of winter.

Alpha Surge rushed forward, lifting his hands up to create a water barrier that glimmered for a split second before it froze solid from the chilled atmosphere. My environment may have been what helped protect us from the aftershock of heat that crashed into the frozen wall and left a boiling crash of water in its wake.

Whatever dark forces still lingered around us raced to escape the magnetizing wrath unfolding before our eyes, but it was the sudden flow of connections that had been muted a minute prior that broke through the spell of revenge and forced me to acknowledge reality.

*My Queen of Flames - **my mate** - was alive.*

The beam glistened with power, but it was clear it was heading towards us. My body braced itself because the energy was impossible to ignore. Alpha Surge stood his ground, and I was slightly impressed that he didn't literally run out of the way.

I didn't need his protection, nor did I seek his company, but neither of us could move from our spots as the sizzling force continued down the flaming path Echo and Alexandra had created to reach the very tower.

The flames had almost been extinguished, but as the beam moved upon

the path, they rose and danced in acknowledgment. Even from this distance, the heat was scorching, but as the burning threat approached, the beam of light began to dim.

The palm of my hand tickled with power, and I looked to see the ancient mark that resonated with my sword's energy. It glowed with vitality, sensing its partner's approach, and it allowed me to give myself this moment of immense relief.

The beam of flames thinned further, making it easier to see the walking silhouette that carried a sword in their grasp. The familiar incantations that ran down the metal blade of my own weapon of frost were embedded in the blazing orange blade in black.

Those very characters began to shift to a soft white, and that was when I felt the familiar shift in the air. For a brief second, my eyes tugged away to look past the horizon - the wall of hope beginning its slow approach towards us.

*A wave.... Did she...just summon a wave?*

The final trickles of beaming light faded into flickers of embers that began to rain down upon the woman of flames. The sword began to extinguish, but its power was flowing into the woman's body, lighting up her amber, glowing flesh with onyx energy.

With each approaching step, the flames that licked her flesh diminished, leaving a trail of smoke behind as she reached closer to us. By the time she came to a stop before Alpha Surge, the flames lingered around her breasts and lower region.

I was mesmerized by her immense beauty in this raw moment: her pink locks on fire with flakes of pink embers raining down from those levitating strands, her lips of plum, her flawless skin, the markings along her arms, chest, and legs, and not to forget the imprint that beamed with dominance - *almost intentionally* - for everyone to see she was taken.

She took a single step forward, placing herself before Alpha Surge. I

needed a second to take in her height difference as she now stood at the same height as him. It wasn't like her closeness didn't force him to shake like he was bare in the middle of a blizzard.

Her eyes, hollows of black that began to dim until her very orange orbs were back, were staring emotionlessly into Alpha Surge's orbs that were surely a reflection of his shock.

"I'm going to be our savior out of here," she began, her voice loud and clear while oozing mockery. "Then you'll have no choice but to bow to us superiors who've been in this game far longer than you've been crowned. Or at least, were crowned."

The repetition of Alpha Surge's words from her mouth left goosebumps across my flesh, but it was the way she leaned right into his face that made my ears perk up for what she had to say next. She didn't say a single word.

*Instead, she laughed...and laughed...until the haunting sound was embedded in the sky as an echo that went on and on.*

The wave was getting closer, and maybe that was exactly what she wanted as she finally leaned back to whisper, "Who's your savior now?"

Alpha Surge's knees buckled, forcing him to bow before her. The way she smiled was like a villain ready to destroy her prey, and it was the sexiest thing I'd witnessed as my cock twitched and pressed against the tight fabric of my pants.

"This is the second time I've proven my abilities," she reminded him. "There won't be a third time."

She wasn't giving him the option to try to test her capabilities. This was her last straw, and it would be in Alpha Surge's best interest to remember this.

He bowed in submission, and the action was enough for Alexis. She moved again, the mere rise of her feet from the ground causing Alpha Surge to move out of the way so she didn't have to walk around him.

Now she moved straight for me, the wave to the surface not too far

behind. There was something about this scene that struck a chord in me - a dangerous vibration of fear and uncertainty pouncing through my senses as she got closer and closer.

The lingering flames were extinguishing, giving me the perfect view of her nakedness. I wished to think she'd held up a pinch of energy to ensure only I could see her naked frame and no one else.

She was only a few steps away, but that fear rose from the pit of my stomach as I worried she'd disappear into flakes of embers like the flames at her feet.

*That she'd become nothing but ash and the wind would carry her remains away from me.*

I couldn't stop myself from moving any longer, and I was suddenly before her without realizing it. My mind was begging for my body to cooperate - for my arms to lift up and wrap around my mate who had been the true reason we'd been victorious.

She was a warrior, a fighter beyond her years who somehow led us to victory when we least expected it. She'd survive the onslaught of plagued demons, bullets from hidden enemies, and managed to acquire what no female in this timeline could have.

My eyes took in the brilliant crown sitting upon her head, and for this sacred moment, I allowed mine to be visible. The silver crown with various jewels, the symbol that proved that I wasn't simply a "prince" or Alpha was now there for her to see.

*I was revealing what only a few knew. That I was a hidden king blending into the world of power and bloodshed to find my queen.*

***And I finally found her.***

My quivering hands lifted and I took the chance of pressing my hands against her cheeks. They were scorching hot, and I expected to burn myself in the process as my magic attempted to come to my poor hands' aid, but I was already lost in her dominating gaze before I leaned down to kiss her firmly.

Lowering one of my hands, I moved to wrap my arm around her waist. Pulling her against me as we shared the passionate kiss, I felt the wave's approach and braced for its warmth.

When it hit, I held Alexis even tighter, needing to feel that she was with me and would remain in my grasp.

The immediate scent of pine and oak delivered an embrace of calm as the cool atmosphere with droplets of rain confirmed we were back to the surface world.

Slowly, I pulled back to look at Alexis, and she was back to her normal self - the glowing incantations gone, as were the pink flames in her hair. She gave me her best smile as her heavy eyelids fought to remain open.

I could mentally feel the flow of energy reaching the last droplets in her fuel tank, but she had something to say. I waited for her words, but instead, she lifted up on her tiptoes and lightly brushed her lips against mine.

"For once..." she breathed, her voice barely audible, "I'll allow myself to rely on another."

With those submissive words, her eyes came to a close as her body went limp. I caught her with ease, hugging her against me once more. I could feel Adam's energy beginning to stir, and I knew I'd have to get into action before we acted with our cock and not our minds.

*We need shelter and I have to get her immunity.*

It wouldn't be difficult, but that meant we had to move now.

My eyes lifted to see Richard was standing in front of us, carrying a sheet of woven threads that still carried a glint of magic in them. I didn't stop him from laying the fabric upon Alexis's shoulders. He helped me wrap her up in the silky cloth and lift her up princess-style.

Richard didn't say anything at first, waiting to ensure Alexis was breathing and safe in my hold before his eyes locked onto mine. He wasn't hiding the emotions that took over his radiant eyes, nor did he exhibit any fear for the list of things we'd have to tackle now that we'd returned to the

surface world.

"I'm at your service, Maximus," he vowed and bowed his head. If this was the Void realms, I'd continue to feign my innocence, but this was the land where I was in charge and now it was time to get payback.

"Alert my family of our arrival and get the medic packs here to ensure our expedition team is treated. Keep Alexis's members nearby so they won't freak out and ensure Beta Simon and Beta Yuki are attended to promptly."

"And yourself?" Richard inquired.

"I'll be at the cabin. Ensure my family gets the message. They'll know what needs to be done," I urged and then I smiled wickedly as my eyes lowered to Alexis's sleeping expression. "We may be victorious, but it's time to get even."

*It's time to remind our enemies who's really king.*





## THE PAST OF A REJECTED QUEEN AND LET GO

~ALEXANDRA~

***"Rejected Queen. Is that what you want to be known for when they lay your body to rest?"***

My eyes snapped open, but I was forced to remain in place. My hands held something extremely warm, but aside from that, my surroundings were as cold as ice.

The hardest thing to do was breathe, as it felt like the air was slipping out of me regardless of my deep inhales, while every surface of my body was covered by a heavy force that worked hard to steal my ability to feel.

*To simply put it...it felt like I was dying, and I had no backup plans.*

The words of the commanding voice began to seep into my mind, igniting multiple emotions that sought to ridicule my efforts. I'd blindly reacted to acquire something that was beyond my scope, and yet I couldn't allow myself to accept my flawed actions.

*I wouldn't allow myself to regret trying...*

What I couldn't accept was that title. That mockery that was used to label me by a man who knew nothing about me.

Rejected Queen?

Did I ask to be rejected? No...did I DESERVE to be rejected? A man who had ill intentions for me from the get-go took advantage of the perfect situation to destroy me, and with the rip of my fragile heart, he worked together with my enemy to ruin everything I'd cherished.

I had to start from scratch - to allow my legacy to be buried in piles of ash. I bet to the world, I was a broken record who continued to recall what had been done to me again and again, but how could one forget something that left scars upon their damn soul?

*Left with wounds that were undeserved for someone who was an innocent fool entering a world where bloodshed was encouraged and power plays were rewarded.*

No matter the years that had passed, I couldn't get over that single moment that shattered everything. My entire destiny...the destiny of Alexandra Wolf...shattered because of one man's selfishness. One man's loyalty to a villain who sought through the gates of magic to find our hidden kingdom of peace.

*You can't simply forget that, and yet he doesn't carry the title of Murderous King.*

These men who made it their mission to overpower and conquer were praised for every step they made, while I was labeled with a derogative word to diminish my fucking birthright?!

*How is it fair? How dare anyone make a mockery of me? My kingdom. Our history. I was never given the chance to prosper. Never given the opportunity to prove to all those who wished to see me fall that I deserved to sit upon a throne of flames. The throne with the three wolf heads of the first leaders who birthed our kind - all of them women. I deserved to live. To prosper and see the side of the world where I could experience what it was like to be surrounded by love. To feel what it was like to be around family and friends, to be loved by a man that would put everything on the line to see you succeed!*

I'd worked so hard these last five years. Fought against the daily dose of existential crisis while having to force myself to learn the way of these waves and the world of Void Mastery to get the better hand out of everyone. I'd survived, even when I felt like I didn't deserve to, fought against every challenge hurled my way, prevailed through the suffocating nightmares, endured the emotional reminders, and worked against my own mental instability to finally reach a moment that was thrillingly scary, but the most exciting of my entire life.

I finally wasn't alone. I'd made an alliance I never would have had the privilege of creating in the past, met my mate, got a taste of him and the addictive taste of revenge against Eric. I couldn't let it end here. Not to mention needing to find the culprit that just filled me with bullets.

***I can't die. I just can't die! Not as a Rejected Queen. Not with this shattered destiny. My time hasn't come...my flame will not be extinguished!***

My screaming thought ignited a single flame, and there stood a woman of grace. Whatever held me in the shackles in this nightmare screamed in agony before letting me free.

I pushed forward, with the blade in my hand - watching as its beautiful blade diminished into flames that danced around my body and licked my flesh until vivid markings pulsed into existence.

Lifting my hands to stare at my palms, I watched the center of my palms as they grew sensitive with power, the trickles of energy that illuminated in a pink glimmer stealing my complete attention until tanned hands moved to wrap around my hands and hold them lightly.

My head rose to meet the jewels of pink that displayed immense perfection, while dark plum lips with a hint of gloss were lifted at the corners to display a smile that was filled with more than just pride.

Her hair shifted from black to neon pink, levitating with power as those long, silky strands held a hint of flame to them. She looked like me, in a black dress that clung to her curvy frame. The only real difference was her

tanned skin versus my peachy cream complexion.

What stood out the most was the golden crown upon her head. The energy that radiated from its metal surface with pink jewels could take anyone's breath away.

"Who are you?" I whispered.

"Someone you shouldn't know about," she answered. "You can think of me an ancestor...or frankly, your higher self," she hummed.

"Where am I?" I asked as I looked around the dark oasis. "I should...have died. Didn't I? No...I...survived. Returned to Max's side. Then..." I couldn't remember anything else.

"All you need to know is that you almost did die, but I made a bargain with the sword that has now claimed you as its rightful owner."

"A bargain?" I inquired and blinked in confusion. "What did you decide upon to spare my life?"

"I am the power that resonates within your crown, Alexandra. A secret entity that should have blended with your wolf, Eve."

"Eve...you mean Maeve," I whispered.

"Eve," she corrected as her smile further spread. "I'm Maeve."

"I'm confused," I couldn't help but admit the truth because I wasn't understanding. Maeve was, well...Maeve. My wolf that I liked to call Eve. Who was this woman and why would she claim she was Maeve?

"You have every right to be confused. Your royal family failed at truly preparing you for what was ahead. I can't blame your parents. They were too busy trying to prevent war from entering our land. Sadly, their efforts were worthless, but not forgotten. I remember it all and that is why I exist. The problem is, you're not supposed to know of my existence."

"Then...why are you revealing yourself to me?"

"Well, it's part of the deal I made with the sword. It's exactly why you didn't perish when that hired man tried to kill you."

"You mean the demons wouldn't have been able to kill me?"

"Those dark creatures are harmless to you, child. You were born from their very blood. Why else would the Dark Senator be so desperate to find you?"

"I'm not sure," I confessed, feeling the need for more knowledge but unsure where to grasp the answers to the flow of questions harbored within my mind.

"You must find the truth of your roots, Alexandra," she urged and squeezed my hands. The gesture kindled black magic circles that bled to the surface of my palms, the star of black ink resonating with the same inky energy as many of the shadow beings in the Void Mastery.

"How? My kingdom is gone."

"Our kingdom isn't all lost," she revealed. "It's simply hidden in the darkness and requires you to be sitting upon that throne to unlock the source of those very roots."

"How will I do that, and what do I owe for being alive?"

I had to make sure to find out what the price was for survival.

"Our energies should have been one after the night of the crowning, but the Dark Senator wished for you to not sit upon that throne again. He doesn't want you retrieving the memories of your past life, nor does he want you on the side of light."

"Side of light? Are we the light side?"

"No. We are truly the dark side, but without darkness, there is no light," she emphasized before continuing, "You are the ying to another kingdom's yang, a kingdom that has always been in an alliance until the Dark Senator destroyed the bond between you two. History is repeating itself, only we're going to be the Grandmaster of this game of chess."

She let go of my hands to press her hands upon my cheeks, raising my head up higher as if to correct my posture.

"The sword and I have the same mission, if you'd like to call it that. Its purpose is to be used by one worthy, like its last master, while I wish to be

free from the shackles that chain me to this life of solitude within your crown."

"Can't I free you?" I asked. Her request didn't seem difficult. If I figured out how to free her, she could ascend...right?

"You can," she confessed but actually looked hesitant at the idea. "It would come with consequences that wouldn't favor you. If you weren't someone I actually admire, I would have tricked you into doing exactly that."

"Admire? Me?" I was flabbergasted by the idea of someone as spiritually powerful as her admiring someone like me. I wasn't close to her level of power, and if she was a part of the crown upon my head, I could only assume she was an ancient power that had been embedded into the royal crown.

I'd read a few tales about such circumstances, but never would I have thought they were real. I wanted to help her, or at least, she looked like she deserved to be saved, but at what cost? Every move in this world was at a cost, and in this state of vulnerability, I didn't carry enough currency to offer something more valuable.

*Or so I thought.*

"You don't know how similar we are," she whispered and briefly closed her eyes. "When I was rejected by the one destined for me, I wilted like a dying flower, and that caused me to abandon my kingdom. My punishment was to carry the burden of my sisters that held the weight of our newly created kingdom. They died because of me, and so I was cursed with this responsibility. To be an entity of power that blended with every crowned heir. When they were close to death, my magic would be retrieved and returned into the crown, and there I'd wait for the next heir. I've done this for decades, and well, this is the first time I've been able to speak of it."

I didn't know what to say as I stared at her with a dumbfounded expression.

"I do not tell you this to pity me. That's not my intention. I share this story because in comparison to me, you never allowed yourself to truly mourn the

fact you were rejected by one chosen by our Goddess. You were forced to push forward after watching your home be burned to ash by the very flames that have protected us for generations. All because of a villain who decided that if your family wouldn't sacrifice you to him, they would face the ultimate price of death through war."

All of this information was new to me, and she seemed to understand as she bobbed her head. "There is a lot that has been kept from you, and sadly, we don't have much time to delve into the past. You're able to reach the depths of your subconscious because your body is extremely drained and slightly affected by the tainted shadows you dealt with. I can sense someone working on healing you, so we're losing time, but my admiration for you is the reason why I decided not to change your fate with my own selfish desires for freedom."

She paused for a moment before continuing on.

"The sword requested to be used by someone worthy. That wasn't a problem because I know you are worthy enough to carry a sword that was once yours to begin with," she revealed. "However, the sword simply saved you from the onslaught of demons that would have killed you if I hadn't tripled the sword's power for a brief period of time."

"You tripled the sword's power?" I asked. "Meaning...when I was in that beam of light..."

"Yes," she replied. "That was my doing. After so many decades of using one of our born elements, simple tasks like that aren't difficult to ignite, but with power comes sacrifice and that's why I need you to do me a favor to compensate."

I simply nodded and waited for her to tell me what had to be done.

"You must kill the one who rejected me and seal them within our crown."

*What?*

"How...would I kill the one who rejected you? Isn't he dead?"

"He was dead," she reiterated. "But your rebirth triggered theirs."



I felt so confused as I tried to piece together this mystery, but she reached out to pat my shoulders before squeezing them lightly.

"Your paths have already crossed, so you simply have to follow the road our Goddess of the Moon has paved for us. You've carried the burden that was meant to shatter you, picked up the pieces of your broken heart, glued them together by working upon yourself, and now you are not only ready to fight for the fate the Dark Senator is desperate to steal from you, but you'll have a pack to aid you on this journey towards a new destiny."

"What about you? How do I help you?"

"By finding the reincarnated man who rejected me. He's closer than you'd think, and his true colors will begin to show, but killing and trapping him in the crown will allow me to be free without negatively harming you."

"What happens if I just free you?" I just wanted to know the burden of the truth.

"You'd most likely go insane." She didn't beat around the bush as her eyes darkened with immense hate. "I carry the emotional turmoil of centuries of rulers, Alexandra. If you let me free, my logical side, which you are currently speak to, would be overridden by the vengeful part of me that would seek the opportunity to have revenge. I died as the true Rejected Queen, my name slandered and mocked rather than praised and admired. All because this man decided I wasn't worthy of the throne I'd worked to obtain with my sisters. By helping me, not only would I be free to assist you without the chance of insanity, but I'd be given the opportunity to ascend to face judgment and eventually have a chance at paradise."

A sad smile graced her lips as she whispered, "Maybe then I'd be reunited with my sisters and see which man was destined for me to be with during my lifetime."

My heart ached at her story, and it was my turn to reach out to press my hands upon her cheeks to grasp her attention.

"I will do it," I vowed.

Her eyes widened at my declaration, and it was her turn to be slightly confused.

"Shouldn't you further question my motives?"

"If you wished to kill me or encourage my insanity, you would have let me die and attempted to control my body. That's an option, isn't it?"

She was taken aback by my observation as I further smiled.

"The world has always underestimated me. Belittled my knowledge, abilities, power. Some do it simply because I was born a female. I act naive out of habit, but I see the bigger picture as well as the fine details. You could have pushed me to let you free here and now, especially when I was in debt after you encouraged the entity within the sword to spare me. Yet, you gave me the privilege to listen to your story...a tale that hasn't been shared with anyone else."

Her eyes watered as she slowly nodded, and I closed my eyes to bob my head at my inner resolution.

"Rejected Queen. Is that what you want to be known for when they lay your body to rest?" I repeated the very words she'd said at the beginning of our interaction. "You said that because that's exactly what happened to you. You were laid to rest with a title that wasn't deserved. A title that degraded you when you and your sisters were the creators that birthed our kingdom of Inferno wolves. Instead of being praised as founders of our land, you were ridiculed and mocked because of a man's selfish decision to go against fate, and you never got to see his end. I may not know exactly who this is, but if it's our destiny to cross paths again, then I'll do everything in my power to deliver the justice you deserve. I will carry the weight of the title that clings to the very crown upon my head and make the moves that will deliver you salvation."

I watched as tears pooled in her eyes and spilled down her cheeks. I brushed them away with my thumbs, feeling the nagging pull of my consciousness that fought for my attention.

Ignoring it, I whispered, "Does that sound fair, Maeve?"

"Yes," she whispered with a trembling lip. "But...you can't tell anyone of this."

"A secret," I concluded. "So be it. But what about Maximus?"

She thought about it as she blinked away her tears.

"He is the only exception because he's your mate. He carries a story, one that I'm intrigued to see you discover. But no one else."

"Very well then," I concluded, the nagging feeling growing and making the dark world around us begin to fade away into golden dust. "I think...I'm waking up."

"That you are," she replied and unexpectedly hugged me.

"Maeve?"

"Your wolf, Eve, knows of my existence. My image in this realm is of your higher self, but my image upon the surface replicates hers. There will come times when I will take control for your own safety. I've done this in the past, but with this new partnership, I believe you deserve to get a glimpse of what I can do," she quickly explained. "May this kindled partnership aid both of us as we seek happiness. Do not fear the darkness that grows within you. You are not evil. You are simply made to carry darkness that can compete with what's trying to plague this world as we know it."

It was like she was warning me of what was ahead, and deep down, I appreciated it.

She pulled back to look me up and down with pride, her image beginning to fade away, like the rest of the world.

"You're about to enter a world you're not familiar with, but embrace every moment. We're shifters who rely so heavily on our magic, that we forget to enjoy the wild side as a wolf shifter and embrace the realms of our human nature. Discover what it's like with Maximus on your side."

"Maeve," I whispered as a lump formed in my throat, attempting to prevent me from asking the question that tugged at my fears. She seemed to

grasp what I wished to ask, and her eyes softened as her body was close to being completely gone.

"Maximus is not fool's gold, Alexandra. He loves you...and he will aid you in fulfilling your destiny. All you have to do...is...let go."

She was nothing but colorful specks of dust as my eyes grew heavy and I fell backward. I didn't fight against the downward sensation, my mind clinging to the last bit of Maeve's words as my consciousness took its moment to fade away.

*Love. Maximus loves me. I just have to let go and love in return.  
Let...go...*



## SISTER FROST AND ROYAL HOUSE OF ATLAS

"**A**lexandra?"

The tender spoken call tugged me out of unconsciousness. My soreness was the first thing I noticed as my senses rose to the surface, followed by the unnecessary warmth of my body.

I didn't get fevers often, but after the extraneous whirlwind we'd dealt with, I guess a fever was better than death. After a few test trials, I finally managed to open my eyes while my consciousness embraced the familiar energy of my wolf.

*Eve. You're back.*

The waves of relief hit me first before Eve answered me.

***"I never left you, Alexandra. I was kept captive by some box of black fog. By the time I'd noticed the shift in energy in the air, the fog was already spreading through your subconsciousness. I tried to stop it. I really did...but nothing helped."***

The guilt in her voice alone was enough to push me to slowly sit up. I hadn't sat up too fast, but I did feel a little lightheaded from the simple move. That was nothing compared to the heavy burden of worry that settled upon my heart at the thought of Eve feeling so damn guilty over circumstances far out of her control.

*Eve, none of this is your fault. I didn't think such heaviness over time*

would disable our ability to use our wolves. It was a misjudgment on my part, and the rest of the crew fell into the same predicament. You shouldn't carry guilt.

***"You almost died," she emphasized. "Frankly...you did die. If it wasn't for the added circumstances and aid, you wouldn't be here speaking with me. I watched helplessly the entire time. I really fought to get out of the misty fog but to no avail. I'm sorry."***

I literally couldn't stand this, and I shook my head before running my hands through my short locks out of frustration.

*Eve. Please. None of this is your fault. I should be the one apologizing, honestly. It was a misjudgment and you were simply a victim of me being blindsighted. I'm sorry you had to experience that as well as witness everything that transpired. I'm okay. A little fever isn't going to do anything lethal to me. I'm just relieved you're okay.*

She didn't seem completely convinced but I felt the trickle of calm as she acknowledged that I was fine and not on the verge of death.

My eyes decided this was the moment to look around the vast, luxurious space, taking in the blue and silver undertones of the bedroom while admiring the golden accents of the various decor in the room.

The scent held a familiarity to it, the pine far stronger than the touch of roasted chestnuts. Aside from that, the room itself didn't really give off a homey atmosphere. It was frankly "cold" which may confirm it was a guest room of some sort.

I noticed that I was naked, the very thin white sheet sitting upon my lap. Covering my frame with the white sheet, I took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

A few bandages ran along my arms and with the slight lifting of the sheet, I saw the ones around my thighs. I didn't feel like I'd acquired any wounds, but I guess my body was getting back to its normal healing abilities.

"Thank goodness you're awake."

Lifting my gaze to the door, I was taken aback by the magnificent-looking woman standing at the doorway. In one hand was a tray of steamy hot food, while the other held what I could assume was a formal black dress.

This woman's hair was surely longer than Maximus's, the snowy white shade shifting into a cerulean color with tips of teal. Her hair was in bountiful curls, and she wore a tiny silver tiara.

She was extremely thin, not in a malnourished way, but as if her metabolism wouldn't let her gain a single bit of fat, let alone muscle. It made her look rather frail, to be honest, and her pale complexion only contributed to such an image, but her vigor in magic was strong - extremely rich with elemental energy that again, was similar to Maximus's.

It took me an added second to see the similarities in her facial qualities and overall appearance. Essentially, she looked like the female version of Maximus.

"Are you Alpha Maximus's sister?" I croaked, only now realizing how dry my throat was. It forced me to cough to try to clear it.

"Ah. Don't choke," she urged as she used her back to close the door before rushing over to the bedside. Lowering the tray onto the nightstand, she laid the dress at the end of the bed and poured me some chilled water from the clear jug. "Please drink some water."

I observed her as I took in her soft voice. She surely could have been the perfect princess because she hit all the standards they wished a female would project.

*Fragility, humbleness, beauty, and grace. They groomed her perfectly in comparison to how I came up. Everyone dislikes a woman with Alpha qualities who won't take any bullshit.*

"Thank you," I muttered and accepted the glass. Chugging it down invited the cool liquid to tame my thirst and replenish my energy levels far faster than I'd expected.

Arching my eyebrow in question while staring at the empty glass, I



wondered what was truly in the purified liquid.

"I enhanced it with healing properties," the woman answered with a loving smile that took over her light pink lips. "Our healers are in town aiding the crew members and knights that returned from the expedition. Frankly, Max has a few trust issues, so I'm the only one he trusts with you right now."

"And you are...?" I couldn't help but ask, even though it sounded rather rude.

"Rosalina Atlas. The eldest child of King Atlas of our royal pack. It's a pleasure to meet you, Alexis. That's the name Maximus told us."

"Yes," I replied. "Alexis. Nice to meet you."

"Likewise." She beamed and reached for the tray of food to offer it to me. "Please eat. The major wounds you had were some burns. They hadn't shown up immediately upon your arrival, but due to the blanket of Void energy clinging to your body previously, your healing abilities were slowed to a bare minimum. I think they may have healed by now, but the food is dosed with vitamins that will accelerate the healing process and the bandages are coated with a gel that seeps into the skin and solidifies the wounded section so the healing nutrients will go directly to the injured spots."

"You know a lot about healing," I voiced while accepting the food. I stared at it for a long moment because it seemed homemade.

"Ah. Well, I'm hoping to become a Pack Healer seeing as I don't really give off Alpha or Beta vibes. Healing to me is vitally important in any pack dynamic. In some cases, it's life and death. I know most people brush it off as unimportant, but I think it's crucial to have a few healers in every pack."

"I agree," I replied. "Healers in higher positions within the pack is vital for balance and battle purposes. Did you make this?" I couldn't help but ask.

"I did. I enjoy cooking but especially baking. When you think about it, it's another way of healing the body and ensuring one is healthy."

"You'd be a good mom," I muttered and reached for the hot soup to have a taste of it. The way my eyes widened at the explosive flavor that raided my

taste buds had me downing the soup so fast, I stared at the empty bowl in complete devastation.

The snicker caught my attention before Rosalina began to laugh. "I'm sorry...it's just I've never seen anyone eat so fast. The few women here practically starve themselves to try to get a husband, so I never really know if my food is as delicious as they say."

"Starve? With this amazing homemade food?" I gasped in horror. "I've never eaten something so flavorful. I never really got the opportunity to cook, even when I expressed interest. Castle food gets boring after a while. It's not made with love...but this...wow. Okay, now I'm sad."

I was sad because there was no more, and I'd finished it so damn fast I couldn't give the soup a chance to simmer in my mouth.

Rosalina was glowing with happiness as she rose up. "Hold on a moment." She was gone before I could stop her, so I moved onto the simple finger food that I should have matched with the soup. I probably looked like a packless woman eating food like she'd been starving for days.

*I mean, I was technically packless and none of us had really eaten.*

After a wave, I was usually starving and would eat everything in sight until I was full for what felt like days.

The reminder of my "after-wave" activities immediately left me wondering if everyone else was okay. I didn't sense Edwin, Rafael, and Grayson were in danger, but I still worried about the sleeping effects.

Rosalina was back with not one, but three bowls of soup and more finger food that was going to trigger waterworks if she continued being so damn nice.

"I'm back," she announced as she closed the door once again and walked over to me. The tray in my lap was already empty of food. My cheeks began to swarm with heat as I thought about how unroyal I was acting.

I'd been so engrained with rules and regulations before living around Edwin, Raf, and Grayson long enough to not care about my actions, but in

front of a stranger, it felt rather embarrassing to act this way.

"I apologize," I whispered. "I bet I'm acting like a greedy wolf."

"Huh?" She seemed shocked by my statement. "In what way?"

"How I was raised...I guess you can say you have to act a certain way or else you're disrespectful on all counts. I'm not used to interaction in this sense so...I guess I feel I'm being greedy for finishing all the food."

"Nonsense." She shook her head and gave me a wide smile. "You are not greedy in the slightest. Trust me, I understand these 'standards' since I was raised the same way, but my brothers and I don't follow such bullshit rules."

I gawked when she swore, and I surely didn't miss the twinkle of mischief in her eyes while she stole the empty tray and replaced it with the filled one.

"I give off a rather frail persona and many take advantage of such, but your admission lights my heart because it's tricky to find other women who are similar in thought processes," she elaborated. "Aside from the usual royal standards we're forced to adapt to to please older men who simply idolize us for our bodies and not our intelligence, our Moon Goddess blessed us with food so we could be fed abundantly. We shouldn't need to starve ourselves. Know when you're in my presence as well as my brothers', you may eat as much as you like. I try to make Sundays our feast days because it's considered a "royal rest day". To simply put it, the royals made the day so they could be lazy but use the excuse of mimicking the human's holy rest day from their biblical scriptures. It's seriously bullshit to take a day off and do nothing, but you didn't hear that from me. If Benjamin heard me, he'd have a fit."

"Benjamin sounds like a typical advisor name," I noted.

"It is," she groaned and rolled her eyes. "Trust. Me. He's a pain in the arse and is probably lecturing my younger brother out of his mind while our father observes for mere shits and giggles."

I smiled and picked up on her slightly British accent which was intriguing to me.

"Your way of communicating is nice to the ears," I voiced. It was the best

way to praise her accent without being direct.

"Oh, you mean my accent? I was raised in England sometime before we moved to Canada and then recently moved here to New York. Unlike my brothers, I'm the only one who couldn't get rid of the accent I picked up."

"That's really cool," I whispered. "I haven't really traveled outside of New York."

"I'm going to assume you have some sort of royal heritage, at least within the family tree since your aura alone speaks volumes, but most royal families dislike travel. When you have a rather large pack, it becomes problematic to move a group of shifters to a new environment and adapt to such circumstances without catching too many eyes. We're still working on bringing the rest of the pack down here. Those lethal fire waves are going to make the transition a tricky one for sure."

"The fire waves," I whispered. "That's what we dealt with before I ventured into the proper wave."

She bobbed her head. "I'll explain once you've eaten. Brother insisted that you're staying with him, so I'm making sure you have all the lady necessities because my brother is an idiot when it comes to feminine hygiene and if he tries to bring the other dummies into the conversation, it would just end badly. I just recovered and don't want to deal with their bickering. It never ends. Oh. You can just call me Roza, with a z, not an s. Rosa always makes people think I'm a softy, which is expected with my looks, but it really does piss me off."

"So your name would be Rozalina, not Rosalina," I elaborated with the emphasis on the change in letter.

"Accurate," she stated with a wink. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Alexis. I briefly heard it's thanks to you that everyone made it out of the wave alive. It's nice to meet a badass bitch!"

It was my turn to snicker because the way she said it was far too adorable instead of threatening.

"Ugh. I said it funny, didn't I?" she whined.

"More like you spoke it with a nice emphasis," I praised. "I love that. I don't really mingle with any other woman. I've been surrounded by men for the majority of my young adulthood, so..."

"Trust me. I'm no different and the only woman I can keep a conversation with is Beta Yuki, but she's so busy working with Beta Simon that our interactions are sacred. At least with you actually being cool we can have some girls nights and maybe even go out for some shopping. You're going to need a different wardrobe since you're on the curvier side in terms of your chest," she admitted. "Mother let me borrow that dress for you. Her frame is similar to yours."

"Ah. I can try to go home and get some clothes?" I offered. Now that we were back in the surface, it wouldn't be difficult.

Roza shook her head. "No can do. New York is totally on lockdown right now. The damage from the fire waves was extensive. I'm talking major casualties. Thankfully, we're on the outskirts which were unaffected, and we have a town nearby that specifically caters to wolf shifters, so we'll be able to obtain the necessities we need, but no one is allowed to enter a good chunk of the city, regardless of status. Maximus may specifically be able to pull some strings, but he'd have to match it with a sort of meeting or event and that's only if nothing is canceled which is all up in the air."

"Good to know," I commented. "Um...is it okay to use a dress that belongs to the family?"

"Certainly!" She beamed and clapped her hands. "Your Maximus's mate, aren't you?"

"Uh...well..." I trailed off as I blushed and looked at my chest. This was the first time acknowledging it publicly in a friendlier state of the conversation. It was like finally stating you had a boyfriend.

"Don't worry. Max only told Mother, who hinted it to me, but he hasn't told our brothers or father yet because they'll just act stupid and try to

bombard you with a bunch of questions or want to know how strong you are. Unnecessary stuff. Mother, on the other hand, will adore you! She's like me, but less frail and far cooler. She's out on business tonight, but you'll see her around the house. Oh, by the way, you're at the North House of Atlas. Your companions are at the South location because that's where associates of the royal pack are allowed to reside while being given security. It's not too far, and they'll be well informed of your status and safety, so please don't worry about them," she explained. "I also included some black fingerless gloves and I have some heels that will fit the outfit, so feel free to just eat, freshen up, and try the dress to ensure it fits. I can alter it easily if there's anything too loose."

"How...did you know I need fingerless gloves?" I inquired.

"Maximus told me to get you some. He said the middle of your palms run rather cold versus your fingers and he doesn't want you to be uncomfortable. He also said you love heels, the taller the better."

The way I smiled had her replicating the gesture before she leaned in to whisper, "You've made my little brother extremely smitten for you, Alexis. He isn't one to pay attention to details, but he surely is for you."

She leaned back and picked up the empty tray.

"Let's talk more after we ensure you're all put together. Hopefully, by then, the never-ending lectures will be done and I can introduce you to Father."

"Roza," I spoke up as the thought came to my mind. "Are you sure you're okay with helping? You said you were recovering."

"I'm fine, Alexis. Trust me," she reassured me. "Thank you for asking. Get eating."

I watched her leave and returned my gaze to the array of food.

***"She's kind and holds extreme Goddess power,"*** Eve revealed.

"Interesting," I whispered out loud.

*Let's eat and learn about the House of Atlas.*



## ROYAL ADVISOR AND DON'T STOP

"It looks absolutely marvelous!" Roza squealed in delight. "How are you feeling? Up for a visit with the Alpha? Father is probably done with his meeting and he had mentioned wishing to meet you so he could formally thank you for your aid in protecting the expedition crew and knights."

"I'm definitely feeling a lot better," I admitted while staring at my reflection. It had been quite some time since I'd worn formal attire that brought out my figure in a sophisticated manner. I forgot the way it gave me a sense of empowerment, as if I deserved to wear such fabric of luxury and the crown that sat upon my head at all times.

Dressing up with my mother was one of the few memories I still clung to, even though the details seemed to fade away. I wasn't sure if it was due to the trauma aspect, but aside from my brother, I struggled to recall the faces of everyone.

Sometimes I wondered whether I was even happy during those times. Did I really enjoy being a royal in the kingdom of Inferno wolves, or was it simply a role I accepted because it was a birthright forced upon my shoulders?

Pushing the thought away, I admired the matte, black leather dress. It was sleeveless, the straps hidden by my pink locks that passed my shoulders with the added body thanks to whatever magic hairspray Roza had used to make it



look so healthy and luscious.

The leather dress dripped extremely low in the cleavage, making it perfect for me to not wear a bra while showing the tiny space between my breasts. It showed off my mate imprint perfectly, the symbolic tattoo getting its moment of glory thanks to this outfit.

The waist part cinched me up perfectly, making my waist far smaller and emphasizing my hips. The dress ended halfway down my thighs but fell gallantly in the back as the fabric held a mermaid tail to it. A single black strap wrapped around my thighs and my legs were glistening with the moisturizing lotion with golden undertones I'd put on.

Roza had found the perfect heels to match my outfit, lifting my height up. I had noticed since awakening that I was a bit taller than I recalled. I was far closer to Roza's height without heels, and now I was exactly her height.

*Do Inferno wolves suddenly gain growth spurts at twenty-five? I think not...*

I wasn't going to complain about going from 5'3" to 5'7" but maybe Maximus would know something regarding the sudden change. I'd have to rely on him for information until Edwin, Raf, and Grayson were fully recovered.

Roza explained that everyone in induced comas would come out of them, but they needed more than just a few hours of sleep. The healers would ensure every strand of Void energy would be nullified, but they would need additional time for their bodies to get back to normal.

As long as they were in a safe place, I wouldn't be too worried, but it was nice to have aid with this because we hadn't dealt with such situations to this extent. Ya, we'd experienced situations at a lower level with maybe one or two people affected in our mini crew, but having all three of the men I normally relied on down was frightening because there was no one on my side.

*Until now?*

Roza had a character that was similar to mine. She was fierce in a calmer way, and her appearance didn't stop her from voicing her opinion. It was like being a shy individual but being able to defend yourself when you had no choice but to do so.

It was slightly similar to Max, but he didn't give off a frail appearance in the slightest. His quietness felt like more of a blessing in disguise for everyone's sake, for if he tipped over a certain edge, there would be very few survivors.

With the quick shower I'd taken, I felt a bit more rejuvenated. I would have enjoyed a bath, but beggars can't be choosers. At least I was fed, able to wash off the stench of sweat after everything that occurred, and now wore clothes that were meant for royalty.

I'd hopefully get a chance to thank their mother, the queen, for allowing me to borrow such a wardrobe piece.

My fever wasn't bothering me, but I definitely would need some more sleep once I got to introduce myself to the king and thank him for the generosity he was displaying by taking us in. With NYC in shambles from the fake waves, we were sitting ducks until we could venture back into the city and hopefully get our stuff.

I wasn't too worried because our buildings were some of the few that were magically attuned to sustain any elemental catastrophe - *including man-made troubles like bombs and gravity altering devices* - but I did wonder how many supernaturals perished from the waves.

*Supernaturals, humans, basically anyone or thing caught in the path of those fire waves.*

I'd been avoiding trying to think about it because I felt horrible that someone would plan such a dirty trick, and yet I couldn't allow myself to be too surprised either because we lived in a world that cared very little about the destruction of this planet.

*No one ever cares until their flow of money is affected. A shameful reality*

*of this pitiful world.*

"Let's get going so you can come back and rest," Roza encouraged.

With a nod, we exited the guest room to walk through the North Atlas house. I couldn't get a full tour of the place, but Roza explained that the structure of the house switched from a classy "royal" feel with white glossy walls, various furniture, and artwork pieces to decorate the spaces they were most likely have guests, to a more homey, glossy wood cabin style that was designed to Max's and his other siblings' tastes.

Roza personally enjoyed the classy side more because it didn't smell like her brothers raided the halls with their nasty Axe spray, but the South Atlas House was given a more nature-infused look which was her favorite because she could heal far faster in any environment with a spike of nature.

She explained that Atlas Pack was one of the biggest royal packs of Canada, having been England's top before they moved. They had multiple allies around the world, but that also meant they had enemies.

They decided upon NYC for multiple reasons, but one of the main purposes was the increased frequency of waves and the desire to acquire more allies and rare artifacts. I didn't speak about my newly acquired sword, feeling like it wasn't necessary to bring up.

I'd surely get my opportunity to speak about it with Maximus, and maybe we'd be given the chance to just talk. As much as I wanted to see where we stood in all this mayhem of change and with Eric's betrayal, I also craved a moment just to relax and talk like two normal people.

When Roza made comments about her little brother, I wondered about all the traits he carried. The various sides I'd yet to discover, and how it felt to be mated to him. I'd never gotten to enjoy what it was like to be mated, nor did I experience the general aspects of dating someone, which left me feeling a tad excited for what was to come.

Max looked like someone who didn't abuse his power. He wasn't cocky like the various royals I'd encountered in my life who knew nothing of my

heritage or royal connection. He didn't boast or try to act like he owned the universe beneath his very feet. He was humble but knew his worth, which gave him the confidence needed to project strength compared to so many men and their masculine fragility.

After passing some guards, we went through a pathway of pillars that would lead us to the side entrance of the throne room that only family and important relatives took, but the echoed rambling of frustration caught my attention as I followed Roza closer to the source.

"She can't be given immunity! She's a stranger! Just because she aided in the expedition's survival does NOT mean she deserves immunity." The person yelling surely was going to pop a vessel or two with how loud they were being, leaving me to wonder who it was.

We were close enough to see the space of the throne portion of the massive pillar-infused room. A bulky man with a bejeweled crown upon his head sat on the throne and looked completely unamused with whatever conversation was transpiring.

I immediately saw the similarities to Roza and Max in the man's appearance. He was much tanner than Roza, but his hair shifted from white to blue like hers. He wore a blue outfit with golden attributes that accented the royal symbols and trimming of the robe attire.

The scowl on his face could scare anyone out of the room if it was directed at them, but I did notice Echo. The shadow kitten was in his lap, moving his tail lazily from side to side

*That had to be a good sign...hopefully?*

Maximus was standing calmly in the center of the circled space before the throne while a man with a height of 6'2" was stomping around with his arms in the air and bickering about far too many things at once to be understandable.

He had purple hair with red highlights - the combination rather eerie to me - while his skin was pale white like a vampire. He didn't necessarily

possess a frail body type, but the impression he gave me was of a man who'd become a coward quickly if thrown into the battlefield with no armor and weapon.

"Your Majesty, it just doesn't make sense to approve of this in the slightest! This girl appeared out of nowhere, but we're going to treat her like damn royalty?"

"Arwen," the man upon the throne sighed. "As my son's royal advisor, I understand your concerns. Why don't we let Maximus finish?"

"Yes, King Atlas," Arwen replied and turned his attention back to Maximus, who simply stood there like Arwen's pacing rant wasn't bad behavior. There was always this level of entitlement royal advisors carried whenever they waltzed into a room. It was like they were the reason royals got out of bed in the morning or graced the world with their appearance.

It was stupid and immature in my personal opinion, the cocky attitudes and level of power these individuals assumed they carried because of a simple position that was valid within the walls of royal grounds.

*On the battlefield, no one gives a shit about who you are. Royal advisor or not, everyone bleeds the same after a round of bullets.*

"What's her name, Maximus?" King Atlas brought up.

"Alexis," Max replied. "She'd been running from the wave catastrophe that happened three days ago and was pulled into the Void Mastery and crashed into me. We dealt with various attacks, before Eric's obvious betrayal. She assisted in each one."

King Atlas bobbed his head, encouraging Max to continue.

"She was able to retrieve the Sword of Royale Flamme," Max revealed.

Arwen gasped and gave him gawking look.

"No way did that frail woman manage to obtain such a worthy sword. The remaining legendary swords are only for royals and those who deserve to be crowned. The Sword of Royale Flamme is the most powerful weapon in its class. It can override the shadow and light swords, as well as compete with its

counterpart, ice. I'm sure you know that very well, Maximus."

"I'm aware," Max replied. I was more impressed with his patience because I didn't think I could tolerate having a royal advisor speaking to me in such a manner - *as if they were born with the right to be an advisor.*

"She's the specific reason why Alpha Surge is alive, King Atlas. He made an unethical choice and got stuck in the midst of the battle. If Alexis hadn't interfered, he would have been murdered by the shadow creatures and you know what that could have caused."

King Atlas slowly nodded, while Arwen grunted, "She used the obvious knowledge that the death of an Alpha on an expedition could potentially be justified as murder to her advantage! She's a con artist at best!"

It amazed me that this man was going above and beyond to paint me into a villain. He didn't even know me, let alone have enough information to crucify me in this conversation. With every positive, he'd slap a negative against me, and those types of people were the ones you could never convince to be on your side.

*The moment they have a picture of who you may be, they despise every hint of your potential.*

"She's potentially a Wave Expeditioner."

That caught both of their attention as Arwen came to a stop from his pacing movement and King Atlas arched an eyebrow in question. Even with us standing in the shadows, I could see Roza's shock at the title.

"Elaborate," King Atlas declared.

"After claiming the sword, Alexis was walking back to us before she triggered a wave. This wasn't a coincidence, King Atlas. She literally summoned the creation of a wave to take us home, or we might not have arrived without further injuries. I'd gotten word from her companion, Grayson, that before their arrival into the Void, Alexis managed to hold back the two fire waves that were on the path of squishing them to death. I'm attempting to find footage of it, but that's more of Beta Simon's department."

"Interesting," King Atlas declared.

I'd heard of regular Wave Expeditioners like Grayson, but I wasn't aware of specific ranks.

"Impossible," Arwen announced. "There's been only two other Wave Expeditioners with the ability to summon waves in the last five years. We already know one works with the prince of Dubai, and the other died recently. Both of them are men, mind you. No way a woman none of us have heard about has such capabilities. It's simply too far-fetched."

"I know what I saw," Max answered as if he really weren't wasting his time in this debate. "I'm requesting she be given immunity with her first-in-command and trainer." The "trainer" had to be Rafael.

"Neither of them are wolves," Arwen huffed.

"They are hybrids," Max elaborated. "Edwin is a Dark Fae wolf and Rafael is a dragon wolf."

That got King Atlas's attention once again. "This woman is traveling with a Dark Fae and dragon wolf she can control?"

"Yes," Max replied. "The Dark Fae is extremely protective of her. Not in a romantic sense, but a Beta sense. They had gotten separated by the wave, but he returned in his Dark Fae form. Alexis was able to trigger him to shift back. As for the dragon, he respects her and lends his strength. You may gladly ask Grayson if you need a witness's opinion."

King Atlas seemed intrigued by this as he stared at Max with interest.

"Where has she been residing this entire time?"

"Here in New York," Max replied.

"With all this information you've gathered, you make it seem as if you're on her side," Arwen huffed accusingly at Max, spinning around and pacing around Max as if he were the one in the judgment seat. "Why?"

"I'm not hiding the fact that I am on her side," Max stated and I couldn't possibly get why he was still calm. *Or how the hell this man was still is an advisor with so much attitude.*

"I'd like to meet her," King Atlas announced.

That shocked both of them, while I caught onto Roza's smirking lips before she reached for my hand and tugged me forward with her.

"Father." Her delightful hymn-like voice echoed through the throne room as we made our grand entrance. Roza's white dress moved gracefully with every step, her personality not shifting in the slightest with the current seriousness in the room.

Maximus and Arwen turned their gazes to us, and my eyes met Max's as he took me in.

*Slowly, calculatingly, as if he were scanning every inch of me so he could undress me at the perfect pace while laying kisses upon my heated flesh.*

His gaze was heavy with hunger, and my stomach couldn't help but flip in excitement as my core tightened and between my legs tingled. Who knew that a simple gaze from your mate could toss you in the horny valleys of desire?

Roza walked me all the way up to Maximus before offering me to him. I simply smiled while standing in place. I truly wanted to be in his arms, kiss him feverishly, and melt in his warm embrace, but this surely wasn't the time for that.

*But Maximus had other plans.*

His hand retrieved my wrist, tugging me forward so I had no choice but to move until I was literally hugging his side. He turned his stance enough to wrap an arm around my waist as I looked up to see his analyzing stare.

He was clearly making sure I was okay, scanning my face and body and holding me to ensure I didn't slip from his grasp so easily. The room was pin-drop silent as he continued to assess me with his eyes, all while my heart was pounding like a racing horse and my body was a prickling mess of desire.

There was something about a man handling me protectively that turned me the fuck on.

"You have a fever," he finally voiced as if completing his scan. I sensed



Adam just slightly, catching on to the energy within Max's snowflake orbs.

"I'm okay," I assured him with a tender voice. I was acting in this role of being surrounded by other royals. It was a habit I thought I'd broken, but this whole situation had awakened engrained habits and teachings I'd secretly hoped to have forgotten.

*Speaking quietly like a "lady" was one of them.*

He didn't seem satisfied and reached out to run his free hand through my hair and brush my cheek gently. That surely got everyone's attention as he took me in one more time and sighed.

"This won't be long. Then I'll take you to your room for the night."

"You aren't actually saying this mistress is staying here?" Arwen said in disgust as his eyes landed on me. He was taking me in just like Maximus did, but his dislike of me was so obvious, I might as well make him an 'I HATE ALEXIS' sign and place it upon his forehead.

"Arwen," King Atlas stated in warning, and Roza moved to stand right in his personal space.

"Alexis is our guest and the reason why every single crew member, knight, and Alpha returned to us alive! Keep your bitter, selfish insults to yourself or I'll give you a punishment far more painful than what my little brother can," she snarled before she moved away from him like he'd been wasting her life and walked towards the throne until she was at the bottom step.

She bowed respectfully to King Atlas before carrying on like she hadn't threatened Arwen.

"I brought Alexis, Father. Sorry for the intrusion. I assumed you'd be done with this conversation regarding Alexis and her comrades' stay."

"Thank you, Rosalina," King Atlas replied as he took in his daughter's appearance. "You didn't have to go to the extent of doing such. You're still recovering."

"I'm perfectly capable of greeting a powerful woman who helped bring

my little brother back safely, Father. I'm grateful for your concern, but we should focus on what needs to be done about the Dark Senator's next plot. His objective originally was to claim the sword everyone was speaking of, am I right?"

That got everyone's attention.

"Princess Rosalina," Arwen began, but she turned around to give him a look.

"Don't you have something else to do?"

"I'm here on the king's request," he argued.

"And you've spent your time rambling rather than getting to the point," she spoke back. "Where's Haku?"

"That incompetent royal advisor is outside," Arwen huffed.

That made Roza smile before she called out, "Allow Haku inside please."

Her echoed request was followed with the unlocking of what surely were the large doors that secured the throne room. Obviously, with Roza being the daughter of King Atlas, she knew the secret paths to the throne room, but I was sure everyone else had to go through the normal route for security reasons.

I looked over my shoulder to see the approaching individual. He reminded me of a younger Rafael, his skin a similar shade of mocha while his eyes were bright orange with hints of blue. His hair was black and tied in a simple bun, and he wore a casual black top and red jeans.

He didn't look anything close to a royal advisor, simply because he wasn't wearing the formal robes that Arwen was wearing - *and the obvious lack of confidence in him.*

**"Hybrid. Inferno and Frost."** Eve's announcement caught my interest as I took in the boy's overall 5'3" height. He had to be young and hadn't hit puberty yet or something because his aura didn't match his appearance in the slightest.

*His aura is strong like Rafael's and yet he's...really weak-looking.*

***"Lack of confidence, muscle, a few areas that need to be worked on. Nutrients as well."***

"Are you new?" The words left me before I could stop them, and the boy turned his attention to me. One look and his eyes widened, taking me in before he dropped to the floor and was literally bowing at my feet.

"What the..." Max began but Haku interrupted, "Princess of Flame, sorry for my disrespect."

"Um..." I began. I didn't know what to say because goodness, this hadn't happened in five-plus years.

"Haku! Rise up this instant!" Arwen snapped. "She's not a princess. She's a mere guest."

Haku completely ignored him, and I looked to Max for some sort of explanation.

"He's a recent rescue," he revealed.

"Rescue?" I inquired.

"Since the beginning of the waves, multiple kingdoms have fallen prey to being kidnapped by selfish packs who want nothing but power. Others work with the Dark Senator. They kidnap survivors and only keep ones they think will be worthy in the long run. They're trapped in prisons and given the bare minimum. When I'm not in the Void Mastery, my brothers and I work on finding these locations and freeing the captives so they can go to organizations that can help them re-enter civilization," he explained. "HakuHaru is one of those survivors, and I specifically requested for him to be trained as a secondary royal advisor."

"Which makes absolutely no sense." Arwen didn't hesitate to state his obvious displeasure.

I ignored him as I moved out of Max's hold to take a step and crouch down to Haku.

"HakuHaru?"

His head immediately lifted up, and I noticed the way his eyes danced

between the two colors of orange and blue.

"Which name do you prefer?" I felt the attention on me as HakuHaru stared at me with bewilderment. "Haku or Haru?"

The way his eyes widened confirmed what I immediately got from his name, and I couldn't stop myself from smiling as I reached out to very gently stroke his head.

"It's been a long time since I've met a hybrid of our kind," I whispered so lowly, I wasn't sure anyone else heard me, but HakuHaru did as his eyes filled with tears.

**"Your Majesty?"** The words that left him weren't English, but they translated in my mind immediately and I knew for sure this person used to be among my kingdom.

**"It's a secret,"** I voiced the importance first. **"The royal advisor knows not of my royal status. Neither does the king. Maximus is aware. Roza...I'm not sure if she knows the details, but I trust her."**

He was on his knees, his hands placed together as if in prayer.

**"Queen... you're alive. They say you perished with the prince and the rest of the kingdom. I had hoped...but I was a boy. I couldn't aid in the battle. I was captured...and I'm here. I...struggle with being here. They don't understand my speech. I know little English."**

I bobbed my head in understanding and continued to stroke his head.

**"Do not worry. I'm here now. I'll explain that there's a language barrier, but I know someone who may assist you in transitioning here. I'm unsure if you've met him, but do you recall Rafael?"**

His eyes immediately widened with hope.

**"Rafy. Dragon warrior. Friends with my father...well...my family is gone."**

**"It's well, HakuHaru,"** I assured him. **"I'll explain things after, but for now, please rise."**

He slowly nodded and with my offered hands, he rose up. Blinking away

his tears, he bowed his head once more before speaking in English, "My full name is HakuHaru. My preference is Haru."

"Haru it is, then," I reasoned. "Alexis."

"Alexis," he replied and bowed his head once more.

"You understand his native language?" Roza seemed impressed, probably because she could tell it wasn't simply a common language, but a native tongue that only Inferno wolves could speak. You learned it first before English, but due to my royal upbringing, I learned both right away.

"I was taught the tongue alongside English," I answered truthfully. I felt Max's arms return to my waist as if he couldn't stand us being a mere step apart.

"So he prefers Haru?" Max asked, sounding intrigued.

"Yes. He's half Inferno wolf, correct?" I tossed out for confirmation. Max nodded slightly, encouraging me to continue with the caution to not reveal too much. "As you know, I've been researching the culture of Inferno wolves for years. They have a certain dialect that was used in the very beginning when supernaturals were created. It's how the Inferno wolves communicated. I learned the basics from the books. Traditional Inferno wolves name their children in a way that can always be shortened. It could be why he was named HakuHaru. In some cases, Haku would be the formal name for those whom one would never likely speak to again versus Haru, which would be more personal like any other name. Like...how you're Alpha Maximus, but some would call you Max."

My elaboration actually made him quirk a smile.

"Then please tell him I apologize for not asking his preference," Max concluded. We shared a loving look before I relayed the message to Haru, who grew flustered in seconds.

***"I-I don't deserve such an apology from the Alpha who saved me,"*** he spoke.

***"He genuinely wants to, Haru,"*** I replied. ***"I think he sees potential in***

you."

*"Me? Hmm...the man there speaks ill of me,"* he stated with a sad smile.

*"He speaks ill of everyone it seems,"* I voiced and lowered my voice as if they could understand me, *"He'll lose his place soon enough. Maybe you'll prove to Max you can be a better advisor. Rafael will assist you once I can introduce you two and we get settled."*

*"You're staying here?!"* He couldn't hide his excitement.

*"I'll need the king's permission, but I can't go anywhere else until things are corrected after the fire waves,"* I explained. He nodded, but I could tell he knew something from the way his eyes darkened just slightly.

*"Do you know something, Haru?"*

*"Cannot express here,"* he admitted quietly as he fidgeted in place.

*"Can you tell me at a later time?"* He thought about it, but his eyes moved to Arwen, which wasn't a good sign to me. *"I'll ensure Arwen isn't present."*

The additional statement was enough to encourage him to agree as he nodded respectfully.

"Can we not waste the king's time with conversations we can't understand?" Arwen scoffed. "Preference of names is not important compared to us learning more about this sword and how someone like Alexis was able to retrieve it."

"I'd personally like to have this conversation with the king," Max announced. "With Alexis's company."

"Are you trying to excuse me from this vital conversation?" Arwen gasped in horror. "As your royal advis-"

"Why must you always use such a title to deem your importance?" I interrupted and couldn't help but move away from Max because his temperature was dropping to an uncomfortable low. I knew he wasn't showing it on the outside, but his patience was running thin and it was aggravating my senses enough to prompt me to make a move.

"Excuse me?"

"Royal advisors are always the same. You think of yourself as if you're the rulers of the damn kingdom when you're simply advisors. Your knowledge and advice are sometimes a privilege to have, but it doesn't give you the right to be damn right cocky. You weren't born an advisor. You were appointed the title. I'd never dare speak to someone I'm supposed to follow in accordance to their birthright the way you speak and dismiss people."

"And your opinion is supposed to matter?" he snapped and took three quick steps forward to stand in front of me in defiance. "You are a guest and yet have the nerve to speak to someone like me in that manner?"

"I'm a guest simply because of circumstance and you're slowing down my ability to formally introduce myself," I countered, not even afraid of his attempt to overpower me.

"Arwen." Max's voice no longer projected a calm to it, but clearly Arwen hadn't caught onto it in the slightest.

"You won't introduce yourself unless I give the go-ahead to do so!"

"Last time I checked, you were under Maximus's authority," I tossed back and felt Eve's annoyance as she began to inch closer to the surface.

Arwen surely sensed it because he gritted his teeth and practically growled, "Do not test me, child! It's thanks to me that Maximus has the wisdom he carries!"

"Wisdom can be gathered from anything and anyone. It doesn't give you a right to disrespect him like he's a tool for you to excuse your rudeness."

"How dare you come into our pack lands and insult me like you've known Alpha Maximus from the day he was born?! Without me overseeing his contacts and activities, he wouldn't be who he is!"

I laughed because it was so fucking funny, and all bets were off as any bit of "royal habits" that were in play faded and I was back to my defiant element. No way was this man going to try to act like he fucking raised my Maximus.

*Fuck, maybe he did, but who the fuck gave a shit. His sperm wasn't the one to impregnate the queen, so who the fuck was he?*

"That's rather insulting for an advisor who can't even defend himself against a common guest who can smell bullshit and fragile pride from a mile away."

"You think because you pulled out a sword, you're a badass bitch?" he snarled.

I dramatically sighed and flicked my strands with my hand to emphasize my next point, "As glorious as such a deed is, I couldn't care less about my ability to survive that chaotic mess of a battle and pull out a sword the very Dark Senator is desperate to have!"

My eyes narrowed then, and his eyes widened at the whiplash of heat that surely assaulted his senses. "I'm not here to play to your disrespectful tune, Arwen. I was invited by Princess Roza to speak to the king, who has acknowledged his interest in speaking with me. As for Maximus, he's a grown-ass man with his own brain and ability to venture through the Void Mastery as an Alpha. An Alpha who was respected by the entire crew and ensured every single one remained safe in a coma state rather than be dead at the hands of the plot clearly laid out by the Senator himself. So, do not belittle him like he's a little boy!"

I was getting far too defensive of Max when I really didn't have a place here yet, but the way Arwen's behavior was grinding my damn gears would have triggered a battle in our lands or maybe an execution if I'd been queen and been allowed to do exactly that.

Someone like him clearly didn't carry respect for Max, but committed to the duty out of personal benefit.

"He's a boy still learning the ropes of royalty! Until I've deemed him an expert, he is still a b-"

"He is your KING!" The defiant declaration that escaped my lips silenced him and the rest of the room as a heatwave pushed outward like a gust of



wind, while my body burned with intense heat.

Arwen's eyes widened at my power, which was in blast mode. I couldn't contain my boiling anger at the mere audacity this man carried for someone like Maximus, who would be king. Just because he didn't wear a crown upon his head for the world to see, that didn't mean anyone could disrespectfully speak like he was but a child with no voice of his own.

"Alpha Maximus Atlas is a man and I'm sure he doesn't need me speaking on his behalf, but where I come from you wouldn't still be standing on your feet after speaking so poorly in front of royals, let alone a visiting guest. If this is how you act when other pack leaders are present, then you surely need to go back to royal advisor school because not only do you make yourself look like a complete idiot, you automatically make them assume your Alpha is incompetent and increase the threat to the pack's safety!" I crossed my arms over my chest and tilted my head up to give him a menacing glare. "Just because someone is quiet and observes you like a hawk, that doesn't mean they won't strike when they've had enough of watching repetitive behavior. Learn to bow in submission to those who give you the privilege to be yourself rather than out of egotism."

"How dare you insult me?!" he roared, but I stood my ground. I wasn't afraid of him, even when he lifted his arm up to strike me.

I waited for him to finish the deed, my eyes displaying just how little I feared the consequences. This may have been out of my area of comfort and I should have displayed some gratitude for the safety of myself and my comrades, but I wasn't going to back away from a measly slap.

Eve was literally a step away from taking control, and we both waited in hidden glee for him to commit the deed. The last time someone tried to hit us like we were their child it cost them their life. This would be no different, even with the new circumstances.

*Slap me. I dare you.*

It took Arwen collapsing to his knees for me to notice the sheet of ice

upon the floor that didn't simply spread a few feet but covered everywhere but the final step to the throne. I blinked a few times, goosebumps trailing through my entire body as I actually shivered. Not because of the Siberian temperature, but because of the magnetizing force of power that surely would have forced me to kneel if it wasn't for my own royal traits.

Slowly, I turned my stance to see Maximus standing there with enough predatory energy to make any prey fall upon their knees and beg for mercy. It was like a switch had been triggered and I was seeing the threatening force of masculinity with my own two eyes - *and oh my Goddess, was he fucking heavenly in attractiveness and lethal like the very devil, Lucifer.*

It had to be my eyes, but he looked double his size now, power brewing off of him in waves of frost that flowed down his body like he was an open-standing freezer. His hair of white was practically frozen from the very temperatures around him, and I could tell that if anything wrong was said in his presence from this moment on, he'd shift into his wolf form.

*So fucking hot.*

**"You're completely turned on right now,"** Eve complained.

*Don't tell me you're not in the slightest bit aroused by this display of supremacy.*

***"I'm more captivated at the fact that someone is finally standing up for us. No one used to do that for us before."***

Her reminder actually made me realize how true her words were. My childhood wasn't butterflies and rainbows, and though I had Edwin and Raf to protect me at times, they couldn't interfere when I was being "punished" for not doing things the proper way.

There was a limit to how much they could interfere, though Edwin had broken such rules a few times to protect me - *his Dark Fae side taking over, which may have been why they never could do a thing to me afterward, since I was the only one who could pull him back to normal.*

This journey was really bringing out memories I'd forgotten, but my

attention returned to the present as Arwen spoke with a trembling voice.

"Alpha Maximus," he began but Max's mere exhale created icicles that darted right past me and managed to be in Arwen's face the next second.

**"Okay. That was fucking hot,"** Eve responded like she was out of breath, and could I blame her? I was on the verge of panting like a wolf in heat.

*This man just breathed and created lethal icicles. Goddess of the Moon blessed me with a god.*

"A-A-Alpha-"

"Just because I enjoy feigning ignorance, that doesn't mean I won't bare my teeth when you threaten what's mine, Arwen." Each step that followed triggered snowflakes of ice beneath his feet and shard statues left behind until he stood right behind me.

Possessively, an arm wrapped around my waist from the front side, pulling me against his rock-hard frame. He was far colder than a block of ice, but it felt rather nice with my fever still acting up.

I took in Roza and Haru standing off to the side of the throne, Roza grinning from ear to ear, while Haru was hidden behind Roza like his life depended on it. Only King Atlas seemed completely unfazed by the entire thing, staring down at us like this was boring entertainment.

"Never dare raise your hand against what's mine again. You know damn well who holds the fucking crown. I can ruin you with a single thought and destroy any chance you have of being anyone else's royal advisor with one word. I've dealt with enough betrayal and bullshit. If you can't shut up and advise me properly, quit so someone else can," he snarled.

Moving his gaze, he looked to King Atlas.

"I'm no longer in the mood to discuss things further and I won't waste Alexis's time when she's not at one-hundred percent after being deemed worthless by a coward who finds every fucking excuse under the sun to get out of attending the expeditions but speaks like he's the reason I fucking breathe."

He swiftly turned with me in tow, before letting me go to take my hand.

"Haru."

"Y-Yes, Alpha Maximus!" he replied, even with his obvious nervousness.

"Get my brothers to escort Arwen to the dungeons for the night. If I'm in a good mood by the morning, I'll get him out myself."

"Y-Yes, Alpha! All three of them are on the west entrance. Should I just pick one?"

"Let them know Arwen is being disrespectful to my mate." He said it loud and clear, and purposely waited a few added seconds to emphasize what he'd revealed. "I'm sure all three of them would like to let out their frustration over Arwen's lack of professionalism that resulted in them not getting to meet her until tomorrow. "

"Yes, Alpha!" Haru replied, already sliding across the room to get to the other entrance.

"I'm excusing myself," Max declared. I was sure it wasn't up for discussion. "We'll resume this tomorrow."

I totally wanted to see Arwen's face, but we were already moving as Maximus tugged me along until we were passing by the massive metal entrance doors and turning down another hall.

Each step was still igniting icy snowflakes upon the ground, to the point that I tugged on Max to stop. His abrupt stop should have confirmed he wasn't in the mood to talk, but I pointed to the trail behind us. "You're going to ruin the tiles," I voiced earnestly. "They look imported."

He arched an eyebrow at me, but I didn't feel as though he was going to hurt me.

After one long stare, he muttered, "You got taller."

"I know." I didn't know why the idea had me so damn excited, but even with the borrowed heels, I had to go on my tiptoes and tug on him enough to lay my lips on his frosted ones.

He didn't move as I let my lips linger against his for a while longer,

before going back down and giving him a softened smile.

"Twenty-five years and that's honestly the first time any male of interest has ever defended me against another in power," I quietly confessed like it was an embarrassing secret. I was sure he could feel my gratitude and how moved I was, but I wished to voice it for his own ears to hear. "Thank you, Maximus."

He moved his free hand to lay it upon my forehead, and huffed, "Your fever is making you spout silliness," he whispered. "You shouldn't have to thank your mate for doing what's right."

He was moving again and tugging me along, but his steps didn't freeze the tiled floor, just like his temperature wasn't going to give me frostbite.

"No one will ever talk to you like that again."

I smiled as my hand squeezed his, and he lightly returned the gesture with a slight squeeze of his own.

It felt weird walking through these halls like we'd walked through them plenty of times before, but this feeling of empowerment as his hand held mine was new within this precious moment, yet ancient in nature.

Regardless, it delivered the same level of safety I always wished to experience.

*Is this what it's like to be loved? If so...I don't want it to stop.*



## SOAKING WARMTH AND BE MY LUNA

~MAXIMUS~

"This isn't the way to the guest room."

My cycling thoughts on how many holes I could put in Arwen's body came to a pause while I forced myself to look over to my mate.

Just looking at her curious orange eyes and how the dim lights of the hall made them twinkle took my breath away. It made me want to get lost in their immense beauty for hours on end.

*To get lost in her touch and scent and enjoy those soft moans that escape her throat when I'm balls deep inside her.*

They said when you finally found your mate, you'd be a sex addict for six months or longer because the bond would be so raw and sensitive, but just one look at this queen and I wanted to fuck her all day and night.

*Sadly, we'd met in horrible circumstances, but I could work around them for now.*

"We're not going there," I finally replied with a slight nudge from Adam. My wolf wanted us to hurry the fuck up before my siblings reached us.

At least Roza had met her and would appease my brothers' interest for one damn night. Adding Arwen as a distraction was a bonus to keep them occupied. He'd be lucky to breathe by the time they were through with him.

Once we reached my private section of this place, we wouldn't be

disturbed.

"Where are we going?" I felt like she was asking to ensure she wasn't in trouble with me after stepping in to defiantly put Arwen in his damn fucking place. I'd been wanting to put him in his fucking place for so damn long, but no - *he may know the sword's location* - and all the other excuses Father would give to dismiss his bastard-like behavior.

I'd learned everything I needed to learn about the Sword of Royale Givre but he assumed I hadn't done more research aside from what he'd fed me. It was my sword after all. I had to learn as much as I could about the lethal blade of frost.

Adding that its counterpart was Flamme encouraged me to learn as much as I could about the Sword of Royale Flamme, but Arwen only knew a certain amount of information about the sword.

*Or at least he was holding back for a certain reason.*

With Eric's betrayal, I couldn't fuck anything up, especially with Alexandra in my life. It was my duty to protect her, even though she could protect herself. There was something about her that made me want to keep her in my arms and never let go.

*To bathe her in love so she understood that she deserved my affection.*

Surely being rejected had taken its toll on her, but I felt like there was a lot more I knew nothing about. I wanted to know more about her upbringing, who raised her, how she survived all this while under the noses of so many packs and organizations that were desperate to find her remains.

I yearned for knowledge about her so I could do everything in my power to make sure she didn't deal with any bullshit from now on.

The confrontation with Arwen was unexpected, but by morning, I'd already have his transfer to another pack sorted. I'd been preparing myself for a while to let him go, and he probably didn't even notice the lack of connective strings between him and me.

Unlike Eric, I'd been prepping myself for his departure because my whole



family was done with his bullshit. He talked too much, boasted too much, didn't want anyone else's opinion, and was far too disrespectful for someone with a title that could easily be taken away.

Mother's last straw had been a while ago, and it was already spreading through the packs we'd been in touch with that he wasn't a good royal advisor to begin with.

We kept him because he knew things we needed, but we had a royal advisor traveling to join us - Yuki's older sister, who'd been a royal advisor for the Dubai prince for years. It was honestly a privilege to have her willing to travel the distance to aid our family and me in particular.

I decided Haru would be a royal advisor apprentice, but I knew right away that Arwen wouldn't want any of that. Anyone who attempted to replace him in his grand role would be eliminated or set up to fail.

Once my family knew exactly who Alexandra was, they would get why Haru would learn faster with proper training. He had potential, extremely high potential not only to be a royal advisor in the future but to be a Beta or second-in-command.

The way he looked at Alexis with hope told me he'd wish to help her any way he could, but it would be a process and for now, I just wanted to survive this damn week.

Whatever was going on needed to slow the fuck down or take a damn breather because this was ridiculous. I truthfully just wanted to sleep for a week with my mate in my arms and forget the chaos going on in the world, but there was so much to do this week.

Father warned of the arrival of part of the pack, mostly the children who would be protected by us until the rest of the pack could arrive the following day. As for the supernatural banquet, it was still on but would change locations.

The supernatural banquet was run every six months, but it looked like this was planned earlier for a reason. Surely the spike in waves and the recent

destructive walls of fire should have been a valid reason to cancel, but no. Supernaturals, particularly shifters, thought they were immortal mother fuckers.

All of us but Sis would need to attend, which would be beneficial seeing as the children would need to be watched and she was the best bet to calm them down. This was the worst time to be traveling to new territory, but if we didn't, who knew what could happen across borders.

"My room." I really had to get out of my thoughts and be present or she'd assume I was upset with her, which was far from true.

*I was fucking horny, impatient, and a tad cranky, but not angry at her.*

She didn't say anything more as we turned a corner and reached a locked wooden door. I laid my hand upon the scanner, and it unlocked a second later. We walked through the open space as the door closed and locked once more.

I could tell Alexis was curious - *with a hint of impressed* - as we moved through the kitchen and living room to head to my master bedroom. Once we were in that space, I could seriously calm the fuck down.

*Just a few more steps.*

My door was already open, so a few swift steps and we were inside my cozy oasis. High ceilings, king-size bed, various wooden decor, and pictures of my family, the pack, hobbies, and shows decorated the room. This place may have been temporary for whenever we came down here, but I made sure it was cozy enough to calm my own anxieties and daily stress.

The fireplace was triggered on by our entry, and the scent of pine and roasted chestnuts was vivid in the small space. They were my two favorite scents, though firewood was a third scent I enjoyed the smell of.

It was a part of my self care and after such an intense battle, we needed a long-as-fuck bath.

*We. Me and my mate.*

Closing the door was all I had to do for my body to finally take a chill pill

and calm the fuck down, but I was already moving - tugging on Alexandra's hand so she spun back to face me. She was in my grasp and devoured by my lips in seconds, my body humming in delight because I was so fucking done with waiting.

I could feel the flare of her temperature, the heat of her body responding to my dominating move. I loved the way she reacted when I took control, how my immense craving to taste her, love her, fuck her into oblivion made her whole body scorch up in approval.

I was excited to eat her fucking up, to satiate myself on her taste, from her mouth to her wet pussy that was surely dripping thanks to me.

When she walked into the throne room in this dress, I forgot to fucking breathe. Every step she took was with power, each click of those black heels emphasizing that she was in my space. Did she know how hot it was for her to stand there in control? How my heart skipped and my cock grew harder as she fell right into her element and stood up for the innocent?

*Fuck.*

"Max-" She couldn't finish my name because I wasn't going to let her, my tongue darting into her mouth and enjoying those inner walls. She gave up far too fast, kissing me back like she couldn't get enough of me.

Every frantic kiss was matched with those hands of hers fighting to tug my clothes off, to the point that I let her go and broke the kiss just to pull off my shirt and scoop her in my grasp in one flawless movement.

*I was fucking thirsty and it was time for me to quench that begging need.*

"Maximus," she gasped my name when I dropped her on the bed, my massive body towering over her not a second later as I nestled myself against the side of her neck. Sucking her flesh greeted me with a moan from her tender lips, her back arching as my hand glided down her abs and slipped between her legs to her wet pussy.

I'd caught the scent of her arousal back in the throne room when I'd lost control. It was uncalled for as I just snapped at the mere thought of anyone

laying a finger on what was mine. I'd worked so damn hard on myself, endlessly attempting to strengthen every area where I lacked so I could attract someone better for me.

Cynthia had ruined me, taken advantage of my innocence and blind-sightedness to drive me into the ground. She'd left me in shambles, questioning my worth on all counts, and I'd worked every damn second to put myself back together.

*To be this hidden brick of power that everyone assumed was still crippled and weak.*

For a woman of Alexandra's capabilities to be aroused by the sight of my flare of authority confirmed that I'd found a gem in a sea of coal. I'd found a woman who could endure both sides of me, the calm before the storm and the cyclone of frost that would be rough and merciless.

My fingers couldn't slow down when I moved them along her folds that glistened with her juices. They tingled in impatience, and I just couldn't stop myself from slipping my two fingers into her at once.

Her gasp was muffled by my mouth as I sealed her lips and began to pump my fingers into her. It felt so good, the way her pussy hugged my fingers like it was my cock, while the heat of her body hugged the chill of mine.

Hot and cold could never blend so perfectly with one another, and yet here we were, connected in various ways and getting lost in this addictive flood of lust after being starved because of life's circumstances.

"Faster," she begged as I let go of her lips for a second to breathe. I smirked at her request and moved my lips down her neck once more, sucking her flesh and biting it lightly. She whimpered and tried to wiggle from beneath me, her climax approaching at full speed.

"You deserve to cum after that grand performance, Alexandra," I growled her name in a husky tone against her ear, and I sped up even further.

"Ah!" She didn't stand a chance as she pressed her head back, while her

body arched so perfectly as she came. I didn't stop thrusting into her, and she cried out as a second orgasm slammed into her senses.

I pulled my fingers out and was between her legs the next second. The groan that left me at the taste of her was drawn out and deep as I began to eat her up. She was shuddering with aftershocks as I licked her in and out.

Her taste was so addicting, her burning aura so beautiful to watch as it wrapped around her frame and illuminated her flesh. Her breasts were out of the dress's hold, and their perky fullness made me want to tease them until they were tender and red.

I finished what I'd started before moving back to continue the next promised deed. Each hard nipple got a moment with my tongue as I trailed around the hard bud before sucking on it. Her moans of approval encouraged me to continue, fondling her other breast while I had my knee between her legs and gently teased her entrance.

My desire to see her naked beneath me pushed me to get that dress off her. I managed to tame the need to rip it to shreds to get to her faster, tugging on it in the right areas to slip it off her.

Getting off the bed, I tossed her dress to the side and proceeded to unbutton my pants while admiring my writhing beauty as she took this chance to breathe. Watching her come down from her high was delightful, and I knew she'd be ready for me as I slipped my pants and boxers down to my ankles and stepped out of them.

Stroking my length, I waited just a bit more - my eyes scanning every inch of her nakedness. I admired the markings on her flesh that were glowing just slightly while observing the tattoos she carried.

One of them was inked halfway with vibrant pink, and she carried a pink wolf that was running along her arm. My attention was tugged to the imprint between her breasts, and I licked my lips as if they were dry when really, I was trying not to jump right onto that bed and fuck her senseless.

My length was twitching in impatience, the veiny thickness excited to

thrust into her tight pussy and be milked. The mere thought had precum gathering at the tip and my body ready for this rollercoaster.

Climbing onto the bed, I positioned myself between her legs but leaned over to gently kiss her. I wouldn't deny that I could feel she was drained, not just from our frisky moment, but from the constant blows of the past seventy-two hours.

The thought forced me to pause my hunger for one fucking moment. I broke the kiss and used my free hand to move a few of her short strands that stuck to her face.

"Alexandra," I whispered. "Are you okay?"

She really didn't look okay, from her pale complexion to how her hair clung to her drenched face. It took her a second to pick up on my question, her eyes opening slightly to acknowledge my concerned face.

"I'm just a little dizzy," she admitted shyly. "I...don't want to stop though."

I felt conflicted as I bit my lip. The idea of her being uncomfortable made my cock shrivel while I put my need on the shelf.

With a gentle kiss, I whispered, "We'll continue later."

"But-" Again, my lips took hers in another sensual kiss. "Later, my queen. Let's tame that fever of yours first."

The way she looked at me was as if she feared disappointing me. I cursed and had her in my arms without thinking, holding her tightly against my body.

"Alexandra."

"I'm so-"

"No," I cut her off. "You're not apologizing for being unwell, nor am I going to hold you in my arms and allow you to think you've disappointed me." We seriously needed to have a talk because I couldn't figure her out.

She held so much confidence on the exterior for the world to see, and yet in the midst of the shadows, there was this vulnerable, fragile side of her that

hid out of fear of being seen.

She had to understand that around me, her mate, she didn't have to play sides. She could be whomever she wished to be in the moment - let her emotions free to roam out and about in my presence, which should deliver nothing but safety.

Did past lovers simply ignore her emotions? Deny her of sharing anything else after the fucking was done?

My kisses were short as I whispered comforting words. Like things were going to be okay, and that I admired her for always putting on a strong front. Deep down, I really did admire her in so many avenues, because finding a strong woman with good intentions was probably the hardest thing I'd done.

Many of the women from my past wished for something in return. Their motives would be woven beneath their innocent smiles and immense dedication to do anything you asked. I'd been one of the many fools who'd fallen into those common traps, thinking that was what I wanted.

*What I wholeheartedly desired.*

Little did I know a cobra hid beneath those layers of happiness and fulfillment. If it wasn't for my sister and her Seer abilities, I wouldn't have been forewarned of their true intentions. It was one of the reasons why I was worried about this relationship until we unexpectedly spent that night together.

When I felt the mate bond surface and could experience what Alexandra experienced through our intense connection.

I waited for her heart rate to slow down before lowering her into the bed and covering her naked body with a thin sheet. "I'm gonna draw us a bath."

She simply nodded, and though she still looked rather drained, she felt much calmer than before. It didn't take long to get the bath filled with water and dosed up with a bit of added herbs.

What was nice about these herbal creations was their ability to seep into the water without leaving actual leaves behind. They blended and heightened

the water with magic that would aid in healing anything.

It wouldn't heal everything, like malignant diseases, but it would lower or potentially heal Alexandra's fever.

Taking my time, I took her into my arms and made my way back to the bath. She'd clearly dozed off, and I wanted her to remain that way so the bath could do its work. It moved at double the speed when you were unconscious, but you always had to be with someone so you didn't accidentally drown.

I knew this from past experiences, having dealt with fevers when my temperature wasn't below "cold" temperatures. It wasn't normally tricky to regulate my temperature to a colder degree, but that was after years of practice.

Settling into the bath, I had Alexis resting right against my body, her back pressed against my abs while the back of her head was pressed against my chest.

I listened to her slow breathing, noticing the threads of worry that flowed from her end of our connection begin to ease and fade. The water would stay at a temperature that balanced both of us, which meant we could stay here for as long as we needed.

Adam was finally calm, as was I. His worry was pretty hidden, but now obvious as the tension in my body faded. Alexis was like a breath of fresh air to both of us, and I was sure he was excited to learn more about Maeve.

*Or Eve. We haven't really learned much about them.*

With a sigh, I closed my eyes for a moment and let my own mind lightly drift. I wasn't thinking about anything in particular, yet my mind was stolen for a mere moment.

*"I'M ALWAYS GETTING FEVERS!" The feminine voice came from me, and I turned my head to look back at the smiling man as he reached out to place the cold cloth upon my forehead and force me back against his massive frame.*



*"True, but I enjoy taking care of you," he offered in return. The smug tone in his voice had me making the water boil in defiance, causing him to laugh and counter it until steam covered the whole bathroom.*

*"See what you did?!" I complained, even though it was my fault.*

*"Sorry, love," he retorted. "Just relax. I'll take care of you."*

**"I SWEAR, I feel like I've been in a coma for a year."**

The familiar voice made the blast from the past disappear as I slowly opened my eyes and felt Beta Simon's presence.

*Finally awake?*

**"Barely," he complained. "Are you okay? Your temperature is on the warmer side."**

*I'm soaking with Alexis. She has a fever.*

I could feel his worry for her immediately. It amazed me how he and Yuki as my Betas showed more concern for their Luna that hadn't been officially introduced compared to Eric, who flipped a fucking switch.

By now, most of the American packs would know of his betrayal and it would take a few more hours to reach the majority of the Canadian packs. I was thankful that I hadn't been as close to him as I was to Yuki and Simon, or his knowledge would be a big advantage to the Dark Senator.

**"I'll bring some fever medicine before you get out. Do you or Luna need anything else?"**

*I'm fine for tonight, Simon. I do appreciate the meds, but make sure you rest and keep an eye on Yuki.*

**"Of course."**

I swore the two of them had some sort of thing going on, but Yuki didn't know where Simon stood because he was far too playful with everyone and Simon couldn't see the obvious interest Yuki carried for him.

They were complete opposites that attracted one another. They just

needed a damn shove in each other's way and a locked room to get some action going.

*Opposites attract. Hmph.*

Lowering my gaze once more, I noticed Alexis's eyes squeeze together before they slowly opened and blinked a few times. I didn't think she'd wake so quickly, but this recovery bath was really doing wonders in nurturing her exhausted body.

She lifted her head to meet my observing gaze.

"Hey," I calmly greeted.

"Hey," she replied.

*What emotion would I pick up first?*

Her eyes always gave her emotions away, but I guess it went both ways between us. There was so much we needed to talk about, but then again, I didn't want us staying up all night when we had this opportunity to sleep.

"How are you feeling?" I figured asking the basics would get the conversation going.

"A lot better than earlier," she admitted with a sad smile.

*Goddess, don't do that.*

I kissed her without thinking, my possessive arm that kept her perfectly snuggled against me pressing her further against my frame.

"Alexandra, can we just talk?" I asked.

"There's so much to talk about," she quietly replied.

"Then can you tell me why you sometimes feel guilty, sad, or worried when your body needs a break?"

I felt the thrum of nervousness, but she sighed and further relaxed into my hold.

"I'm just afraid that by giving off the slightest hint of weakness, I'll be discarded. Abandoned no matter how sorry I am or how much strength I show. I don't know...I never felt like this prior, but with the idea of commitment and returning into the realms of royal packs...I'm simply

worried, nervous, frightened..." She trailed off and looked down as if staring into her own reflection within the colorful calm waters.

Reaching out to lift her chin up, I forced her to look into my eyes.

"Listen, I don't want you thinking that I'm gonna push you away. I'm committed to this, Alexandra. To us. I know we've just met and we haven't really gotten the opportunity to learn more about one another, but I'm far too invested to turn away from you. I...really like you. You're strong when you need to be, powerful and independent when another is in need. Just because you act like a superwoman doesn't mean you don't deserve to have breaks. To have low times. We just went through some madness to survive and it's okay that your body needs to rest. I won't discard you. I'll never abandon you. I'm sure it'll take time to prove to you that I'm in this for the long haul, but I have no doubts about what our Goddess has in store for us. Do you?"

I waited for her anger as she stared into my eyes for what felt like eons.

"I don't have doubts," she finally answered. "I...want this. Goddess knows..." She was actually on the verge of tears, and I leaned in to kiss her lips lightly.

"Talk to me, Queen."

"Deep down, I've wondered if I'd ever had a chance of fated love after Eric's rejection. I worked on myself, hoping it would all be worth it, and like...everything that has happened makes me believe it was worth it. I trained so hard. Dipped into the realms of magic and learned everything I could, even if it forced me to not find a pack to be involved in or seek the realms of my throne in the Void Mastery. To get a second chance and be mated to a man...who actually wants commitment?"

She choked on her sobs, having to pause to gather her breath.

"It's just mind-blowing to me. Aside from Edwin and Rafael who've really been the main adults in my life that have always committed to being there for me, everyone else has broken their promises. Maybe dating Grayson made it even worse because he never wanted commitment. I'd bring it up

sometimes, after a long night thinking maybe I'd get his true feelings on it, and it was always dismissed. Like my feelings didn't matter. It was why I was okay with the whole friend-with-benefits thing, but suddenly being given someone who actually wants to go the whole nine yards is a blessing. Such a big blessing that I'm afraid if I turn a blind cheek, the flame will be put out before I can admire it."

She began to blush as she whispered, "I've had fevers before and no other partner stopped in worry of me. I've pushed myself to limits I regret, and only Edwin or Raf would aid me behind the scenes. I hate relying on people in this world of magic because if you dare, you owe them back in some way. It's not like how wolf shifters are there for one another. It's so south in comparison to the north side of things that I've wished to experience myself. My entire royal life as an heir is based on the flames I inherited and the shadow portion I'm able to manipulate. Essentially, my life is based on the world of fantasy rather than focusing on the shifter aspect and being in a pack."

"Have you never been in a pack?" It seemed rather preposterous because of the fact that she was an Inferno wolf. Their kingdom may have been hidden but it didn't mean they couldn't efficiently have a pack.

"You see how the world essentially focuses on magic since the introduction of the waves?" she offered back. When I nodded, she carried on, "Our philosophy has revolved around that since the beginning. Before my birth. Generations focused on magic more than on our wolves. I think maybe that's why my wolf form is rather shadow-like in nature. Like, when we shift, we have a body, obviously, but it's hidden among flames and shadows, and we're very independent. When Eve is in the driver's seat, it's not like we rely on anyone to aid us in survival. I guess it's what we lack without ever being in a pack and knowing your Alpha, Beta, or other pack members will be there for you. It kinda sucks cause it makes us look feral or like a lone wolf when in reality, we've just never been given the option to be any different. It's another reason why Edwin and Raf rely more on their other shifter

counterparts than their wolf forms unless they desperately need to."

"Do you want to join my pack?" I genuinely asked. She seemed surprised even though it was something I'd decided upon the moment our mate bond was established. She was my other half and being in the pack would ensure I could protect her with all my resources instead of half-assed.

"Edwin and Rafael will be offered places within the pack, roles where they can have their own space and not be too reliant since I've already gotten a glimpse of their power," I added.

Her eyes brightened at the added comment as she thought about it. I felt she was on board with it, but there was a bit of hesitation.

"Grayson doesn't need to join the pack," I urged. "The offer is to you and your comrades. He's your friend, yes, but his decision to not be in a pack is his. He was offered a place in Richard's, and he declined."

"Really?" she inquired.

I bobbed my head. "Yes, and if he thinks Richard's pack isn't good enough, I don't see the need for him to join ours."

"Ours?" she questioned with a smirk.

I felt the heat rush to my cheeks, but I tried to ignore it as I looked to the side and muttered, "Ours."

"Would I even be a good Luna?"

Her question drew my attention back to her, and I allowed myself to smile.

"You'd be a Luna I feel many of our pack members would look up to, especially the children. The female pups don't have many to look up to in our pack. It's mostly males aside from Yuki and my sister."

"Do I have to follow all those royal rules and such?" she asked. "You know, like behaving a certain way all the time?"

"You will be exactly who you are," I urged. "No one will force you to change. I won't allow it."

"Do we have to do those royal gatherings and stuff?"

"Sadly, yes," I admitted. "There's one coming up even with the mayhem going on, but I think we could use it to our advantage."

"How so?" she inquired. "With Eric?"

"Sort of. He may be forced to attend if he doesn't want a full-on warrant for his ass."

"Shouldn't he already be sought after?"

"Normally, yes, but once someone has betrayed a pack, it has to be spread through all the packs internationally. They have to be aware and completely exile him before they give the individual the choice to attend the closest event and meet with the leaders about why they did what they did. Basically, you're turning yourself in. It will ensure he remains 'alive' for trial and stuff, but it may be riskier because of his relation to the Dark Senator, who's basically on everyone's shit list."

"Intriguing," she commented. "Do I get to wear a pretty dress?"

The way she beamed at the idea had me laughing, the hearty sound seemingly lifting her spirits up. "Anything you wish, Queen of Flames," I assured her. "Something sexy that shows that lovely imprint of yours."

"I want to see yours after," she whispered. "And...is your family okay with me? Roza was really nice."

"Roza loves you. She never interrupts meetings unless she wants to introduce someone she's fond of. As for the rest of my family, Father's probably intrigued by you. He's not used to seeing powerful Alpha woman, aside from my mom. Mother will adore you and my brothers will probably attack you."

"Attack me?"

"Not necessarily in a physical sense, but they will bug you to the moon and back asking stupid questions, like how long is my cock and what you see in me. Stupid shit."

"Boy shit," she concluded with a sly smirk. "Got it."

We smiled and fell into a comforting silence as we soaked in the waters.

"In the morning, we'll head over to the South House to check on everyone," I announced, because that was what I needed to do once we released some stress.

"First task as a Luna," she declared with excitement. I chuckled and wrapped my hand around her throat, pulling her back so she had no choice but to lift her head as I looked down at her. The move aroused her, the trickles of lust flooding her eyes while she bit her bottom lip.

"Will you be my Luna, Alexandra Wolf?"

*Be my woman and let me be the man you can lean on through thick and thin.*

There was no delay this time as she whispered, "Yes. I'll be your Luna."

The joy that blossomed from her words buried the memories the title "Luna" once delivered.

*With a seal of a kiss, I enjoyed the sweet pleasures of loving my Luna.*





## UNCONSCIOUS TEST AND I'M HERE, ALPHA

~ALEXANDRA~

*"You think you can get rid of me? That you'll have your happily ever after?"*

THE COLD TOUCH along my body made me shiver as a heaviness filled the room.

*"How dare you move on? You should have been left like a wilting flower. Dead. Useless. Forgotten. Why do you keep making allies? You stole everything!"*

Something sharp moved along my flesh, and if it dared to inch in deeper, it would surely make me bleed.

I should have been worried - *frightened of this energy that wished to cloak me indefinitely* - but my body was frozen and my mind still calm from a lull of sleep I couldn't break through.

*Safe tranquility.*

***"I'm not finished with you. Oh no. I'm only getting started. You think you can steal my pack, Alpha, and family when you're supposed to be nothing but a reject? Destroy my golden chance of being a Grandmaster? I'll show you. Blow after blow until you're in my grasp. Then I'll make you bleed. Slowly. In a marvelous way that can be put on display. Won't that appeal to Alpha's dark side, his hidden desire for bloodshed? It'll be more than enough for him to come for me. Then I'll get both swords and be rewarded with the title of Senator."***

I could feel the hot breath against my throat, sending shivers down my spine and making me uncomfortable. The voice was so far away and yet felt so close, like someone whispering in my ear.

***"You're my Rejected Queen, Alexandra. No one else can have you."***

"Maew!"

The sound was followed with a high-pitched hiss, enough to ignite a deep rumble of a groan.

"Fuck, Echo. Shush. We've barely slept. Don't wake Alexandra."

"Maew," Echo replied. It felt like something was nestled between my shoulder and neck. In seconds, a lull of purrs calmed down the creepy feeling that fought to cling to my flesh. The longer the vibrations continued, the faster the sensation faded away until it was a thing of the past and I could barely grasp what I'd been dreaming about.

There was a sigh before it felt like I was being hugged tighter, the welcoming scent of pine and roasted chestnuts embracing me. It was amazing how such a scent could blend so perfectly, keeping me warm while reminding me of the great outdoors during the brisk winter.

I wondered if Max carried the combination on purpose so no one really knew which exact element he used. Either way, I didn't care. The

combination made me melt in relaxation, and after the weird dream I had, it only further alleviated my worries.

"Alexis?" Max whispered, clearly sensing my wakefulness. I didn't want to get up yet, but I was far too stiff lying on my right side. I turned without much thought, the purrs pausing as paws pushed off me while I rolled onto my left side and snuggled against the muscled surface.

My lips lifted just slightly as the lovely scent encouraged me to take a deep inhale and let it out slowly, my body relaxing once more. I felt so calm, the most at ease I'd felt in a really long time.

Was this how it was supposed to feel waking up in the arms of someone who cared for you? My lack of experience always left me wondering if feeling so wholesome was allowed. Because of my inexperience, I had to remind myself to go with the flow of things.

*If only the world would slow down just a bit so I could capture every detail of this new experience.*

The thought should have pushed me to wake up and spend more time learning about Maximus, but my tired brain decided to do the opposite, and I drifted back to sleep.

My dreams were a whirlwind of interesting events, broken pieces of memories I surely hadn't lived in this lifetime. Horseback riding, running through the thick forest, standing upon the cliff that overlooked the wonderful castle, and love. So much love.

It was always a mindfuck when it came to this past life because the roles were opposite - *or reversed?* I was beginning to piece together that in the past I had to have been a male, a king who carried the element of frost, like Max. He, on the other hand, had to be the queen in my memories, a woman of fire, like I currently was.

The confusing part was that I didn't know for sure if that were true. If I were once a man, would that be the reason for my ease with being more dominant and confrontational? If Maximus were once a female, was that why

he was quiet and reserved?

I couldn't understand it, nor did I have enough information to grasp what I'd only been witnessing in dreams and flashbacks for the last few days. All of this started after the confrontation with those men at the bar, but why?

*Why would I begin to have these flashbacks and then be pulled into Max's life? Is there an underlying plot going on to bring us together?*

What intrigued me more were these swords. If this were some fantasy fairy tale, there would have to be some significance for why these swords were important. Aside from their obvious power, why would the Dark Senator seek them? How did Max retrieve his, and what would happen now that I had the sword the Senator had wished to claim? Who was that person who shot me? Did they die in the explosive reaction? So many questions.

I pushed them all away because I didn't want to deal with any of it, really. I wasn't used to this unpredictable lifestyle, and though it was a tad exciting, it was also nerve-wracking. I was anxious about what was to come. This wasn't some sort of test.

*This is real life and people can get hurt. People can die. Shifters like me.*

My body hummed at the sudden touch against the side of my neck. It was just a slight lick to my flesh, but it warmed me up when it happened again. When I felt the full movement of this chilled tongue, it made me shiver and move just slightly.

I was still in that state of mind where I was half-awake, half-asleep, but my body remained still as ever while my mind was trying to decipher what was happening in this dream.

A hand moved along my arm. The sensation was similar to before, but it didn't feel like a blade was going to cut into my flesh. It was tender, slow, almost possessive, as I tried to pinpoint the exact vibes I was getting from their touch.

Then the hand was moving down my front side, trailing lightly from my chest to between my breasts, pausing to move around my girls and tease the

buds of my nipples. They grew hard with tiny pinches and flicks, the circling press of a finger making them grow harder.

The movement continued down my flat stomach, tracing the light lines of my abs before that hand was between my legs. It should have been enough to wake me up as those fingers began to tease my clit, but all I could get out was a tiny moan.

I could have been experiencing sleep paralysis or this could be a wet dream. The idea of it being unreal seemed to heighten all my senses further as those long, large fingers began to move up and down the slit of my pussy before one slipped inside to test the waters.

My moan was a little louder this time, and my body moved as if to give these intruding fingers the permission to continue. They were icy cold, making me envision a ghost's fingers trying to enjoy some playtime.

*Being fucked by a ghost would be an intriguing thing to check off the bucket list.*

After a few testing thrusts, another finger slipped in and they moved in a perfect rhythm, slow, delicate movements that taunted my senses as my body was lit aflame from the inside. The pace was one I wasn't used to. I rarely did slow sex because there never seemed to be time for it.

Slow sex was when you wanted to draw out every string of intimacy between two people, and I never got the chance to do that. Fucking was to calm the itch and nothing more. To eat the main course and not worry about the appetizers you'd missed or the dessert you wouldn't stick around for.

The taunting fingers continued, and I didn't stop myself from moaning. I wanted them to keep going, to encourage this sensual ride I'd somehow gotten myself involved in. I shivered whenever those fingers would move to tease the bud of my clit with a cold pinch, moving along my glistening folds as if to acknowledge again and again that I was wet thanks to the grace of these cold ghost fingers.

The kisses on my neck were back, and a press of something hard against

my ass made me moan and wish to feel the bulge of hardness thrusting into me. *Had I turned in my sleep?* This surely was turning out to be a wet dream, which was rather inviting seeing as I hadn't had one in a very long time.

When you were friends with benefits, it didn't mean they were your only option, and if I was really in the mood, I'd simply go somewhere else to eat.

Those fingers began to move faster now as if sensing my approaching orgasm. My moans became more frequent, while my pussy clenched around those fingers that were now deep inside of me and moving at a quick pace.

It was like drilling into something and changing the settings so each jolting move was fast.

Maximus's image came into my mind, as did Grayson's. It was like I was being asked to decide within my mind who would lead me to an extraordinary orgasm.

There wasn't much to debate as my eyes landed on Maximus. A part of me wondered if it was wrong to be able to love him so easily. To be able to unconsciously choose a man you'd known for less than four days versus one you'd known for a few years.

I should have thought about it harder, or at least that was what logic told me, but I was tired of thinking. Tired of trying to put my needs and desires on the back burner in hopes that I didn't hurt anyone. No one had ever done that for me in the past, and I wasn't going to let it ruin this pleasure-building sex dream.

The fingers were moving swiftly now, and I knew I had to make my decision vocal, like some sort of test. "Maximus," I musically croaked. Those fingers paused for a sheer moment, and I wondered if I'd answered wrong.

Did it matter if I did? Not to me. Max was the one I was visualizing in my dream, and I wanted to cum at the sight of his chiseled chest, muscled biceps, V-dips, massive length, bulky legs, attractive face, long white strands, calloused fingers, rough lips, and imprinted back.

"Max," I repeated and tried to move. I was so close to release that I'd do it

myself. The fingers escaped my pussy's hold. Surely I'd lost whatever game this was, but I was ready to bust out of this dream and finish myself off with the intense image of my naked mate flashing before my eyes.

"Easy, Alexandra." The husky voice sent me trembling in anticipation, the hot breath lifting the hairs on the side of my neck. Max's voice could captivate me just from the depth of the sound, all while leaving me in a panting mess at the idea of him being so close.

Was this dream real? It couldn't be since the fingers were gone now, but then they were replaced by something far thicker and my pussy walls stretched out to accommodate.

"Ah." My whimpered moan was followed by another as large hands cupped my breasts. I could move enough to try to turn my head and see who held me captive but was prevented from speaking while my intention of opening my eyes faded entirely.

I couldn't let myself think as that thick length inside my inferno pussy began to fuck me balls deep. The heavy groans echoed against the walls of my mouth as our tongues entwined and those hands massaged my breasts.

My mind already decided that this was Max, dream or not. He was fucking me from behind with those rough hands fondling my breasts and his lips devouring mine. We still were on one side of the bed, the position interesting since my back was against his front side.

I felt so small in comparison to him, but Goddess, did it feel so good to be making slow fucking love. My moans matched his groans, my body on fire while his was as cold as ice.

"That's it, baby." Max's voice was muffled against my lips, and I gasped from the way he shifted his angle. "Moan for me." Goddess knew I was moaning just for him. The sounds escaping my swollen lips seemed foreign to my ears as my body was left in a storm of sensitivity.

I'd never felt so fucking good - *so fucking whole* - and I didn't want it to stop. He fucked me at the perfect pace until neither of us carried an ounce of

patience anymore.

"Fuck...please, Max. Max. More. More, more, more!" I was desperate to writhe in a sea of pleasure, and from the powerful thrusts that brutally pounded my pussy, I was going to get it whether I liked it or not.

"You won't cum until I tell you, Alexandra."

This man was testing me again, using the first name that he knew turned me on so fucking much.

There were more powerful thrusts, swift-moving hips, moans and groans, and sucking bites against my neck and shoulder. If I kept holding back my climax it was going to be the death of me, but Max wasn't ready. He turned us so my front side was pressed into the sheets and he positioned himself at an angle that sucked his cock even further into me.

"Shit! Max," I whimpered and tried to stay completely still, my pussy fluttering around his massive cock that was pulsing cold energy. I could feel the dramatic difference between his frigid cock and my flaming pussy, and it only made all of this harder.

One more damn move and I'd be fucked, but I was struggling hard to obey. To ignore the throbbing sensations that assaulted every inch of me and the intense connection we shared in this prime moment. He could feel how close I was, feel how turned on he made me, and I knew without a doubt that he absolutely loved it.

He loved this level of control, this powerful dominance he held over my body. Even in my damn dream, I'd chosen him and he knew it. He won even though I was coming to accept that there was no other competition when it came to Maximus.

He was everything I never thought I needed in a man, in an Alpha, in a wolf shifter of royal heritage. He was perfect, from his possessiveness in the bedroom and his comforting love and devotion on the surface, to his ability to switch to a menacing threat all because of me.

*It was so fucking mind blowing to be mated, to be falling in love with*



*someone you'd just met and somehow had a rooted connection with.*

"Do you want to please me, Alexandra?" He growled my name, and I rolled my eyes and bit my lip to fight how close I was to cumming.

"Mhmm," I finally answered.

"Let me fuck you ferociously and then I'll allow you to cum," he offered. I knew there was no other option but to accept.

"Yes," I whispered and moaned when he moved just slightly just so he could grab enough of my hair to tug my head back and suck on my flesh before sinking in his teeth to leave an obvious bruise behind.

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, Alpha," I moaned, and I felt his spike in arousal at my acknowledgment of his title.

"Good girl," he praised and licked the sensitive surface of my neck before he let go of my hair to clap my ass cheeks before gripping my hips.

There was no warning as he began to hammer into my slick pussy. I was so fucking tight, my pussy contracting around his hard length. He fucked me hard and fast, and I surely was going to lose my fucking mind if I didn't cum soon.

"Max!"

"Hold it," he growled and only pounded me harder.

"Please." I was begging now because I was seeing fucking stars.

"Wait, Alexandra," he rasped, and I could now tell he was close. His grunts grew louder, his thrusts deeper, and the way my pussy squeezed and fluttered around him only confirmed we'd cum together if he just said the fucking word.

He groaned something inaudible before he leaned on top of me, slipped his hand around to grip the front side of my throat, and breathed heavily into my ear, "**Cum, Alexandra.**"

*Oh fucking Goddess!*

My eyes rolled back as my entire body shook with my orgasm that

slammed every sense within my mind, body, and fucking soul. My scream was loud and echoed around us while Max's grunt and drawled moan was timed perfectly with his final thrust that left me undone.

I shook uncontrollably, my temperature fucking skyrocketing, and everything was spinning by the time my high gave me a moment to breathe. My panting was short and heavy, while my body went limp, and the two of us collapsed onto the bed.

He was squishing me with his massive frame, but I couldn't even complain. I was trying to survive at this point because never had I been rocked by an orgasm as powerful as that one, and the mere thought of doing it again was probably going to drive me into an insanity ward.

It took a moment for him to pull out, but I was still on the after-wave rollercoaster ride as I drifted in and out of consciousness. Surely I'd fallen asleep, because I woke up in a warm bath by myself. The shower was on and the glass box was filled with steam to hide the naked, muscled frame of Maximus.

As if sensing my wakefulness, he turned the tap off and stepped out, dripping water. My eyes were still heavy with sleep, but nothing was going to stop me from admiring his tall, bulky, naked, tatted body that had been carved by the damn gods.

*Was I drooling? Maybe I was drooling. Goddess, you've blessed me with a reincarnated god.*

Maximus actually smiled as he reached for a towel to cover his lollipop. The move rewarded him with a pout from my lips. He chuckled and knelt down next to the tub, his lips immediately taking mine in until we were moaning and kissing deeply.

"Fuck, Alexandra," he cursed when he forced us to break the intimate kiss. "You're going to make me need another shower."

"Would that mean I get to join?" I literally purred against his lips.

"No," he huffed in amusement. "We wouldn't get out until we'd pruned

up."

"A pruned cock. Hmmm." I thought about it, which made me giggle while Max shivered in dread.

"No," he huffed, but kissed me again. "You performed well. That's my Luna."

I shivered at his praise and couldn't help but question him.

"Did you just test me?"

"I did," he revealed. "I wanted to do it while you were awake, but I couldn't wait any longer. You're so hot when you're asleep. Like the way you pout these delicate lips, and you fit so perfectly in my grasp. I know you agreed to be my Luna, but I had to test your commitment, which is purest when you're unconscious."

"So when I chose you over Grayson..." I trailed off and was rewarded with another tingling kiss.

"You passed," he answered. "And I couldn't wait for you to wake up to reward you."

"That was a nice reward," I confessed and got lost in his eyes. "You like torturing me though."

"I won't deny that," he admitted. "It's because you'll withstand it if it means pleasing me," he concluded.

"You're right there," I replied and further relaxed in the steamy bath. "What now?"

"Soak up a bit more," he encouraged and lightly kissed the top part of the imprint, which left me quivering at the sudden touch that ignited a wave of lust.

"Max," I moaned as my eyes fluttered closed.

I didn't think he'd expected to feel the shot of arousal the mere kiss caused, but it pushed away whatever else he was going to say as he claimed my lips. He groaned and his hand dipped into the water's surface without a second thought - already claiming its spot between my legs and his fingers

proceeding to work my pussy over once more.

This round was fast and only for me as he fucked me with those fingers like it was his cock thrusting deep into my core. I gasped, and my climax moan was lost in his mouth as he sank his fingers as deep as he could and spread them out against my quivering walls.

He waited for me to calm down before pulling them out. The water did nothing to get rid of the creamy juices that clung to his fingers, but he did the deed by licking them dry.

"You taste so fucking good," he praised with hungry eyes of blue. "We have business to attend to, or I'd give up trying to function today."

"What are we doing?" I breathed, trying to catch my breath. I noticed the twinkle in his eyes at the question.

"You're going to eat breakfast."

"And you?"

"I need to secure the South Atlas House. Some of the children from our pack are arriving today. It's unexpected, but with the madness happening with the fire waves, it's safer to have them around these lands, since we don't get waves. But it's been a while since we've laid residence here and there could be predators around. I have to scout around the entire area with my brothers."

"I want to come," I voiced. He was going to say something, but I lifted my finger and pressed it against his lips, my eyes locking onto his. "Let's eat breakfast together because you haven't eaten anything and need energy after...well...lots of activity," I offered. "Then can we go together?"

I was asking because I really wanted to learn more about pack life. To aid as a Luna instead of simply relaxing and enjoying a fine breakfast when we could potentially be in danger.

He stared into my eyes as if to find any sort of fear, but I was being damn serious. This was the first time I'd really felt some sort of calling and I didn't want to ignore it. I wasn't going to let my fear of change stop me from following this new path set out for me.

*Goddess of the Moon knows I need this.*

Max closed his eyes for a brief moment and lightly kissed my pressed finger. Rising up, I waited for his answer, but he unhooked his towel and let it fall to the floor.

Opening his eyes, he gave me a slight smirk.

"If you're going to ask so nicely, I can spare some extra time to do things together."

"Do things together," I repeated as my cheeks blushed at the thoughts already racing through my mind.

"I allotted time for you to soak in the bath. If we're going to eat breakfast together, I might as well join in."

"That sounds very..." I trailed off as my eyes locked onto his erect cock. "Dangerous."

"Yet, you're excited."

"Danger excites me."

"I've noticed," he stated with a full smile. "Fifteen minutes. Then breakfast and we get right to work."

"Yes, Alpha," I purred and saw the way his eyes darkened at my submission.

"Good girl," he praised as he stepped into the bath. "You better be ready for me."

*I was more than ready for my King of Frost.*



*~MAXIMUS~*

"MAXIMUS. THIS...ISN'T...AH." Her gasp only made me want to continue nipping her shoulder, enjoying the way she wiggled on my lap. Why was I

keeping her captive? Honestly, it was Adam's fault for getting so transfixed on the way she ate fruit.

*Seductively eating those strawberries while her eyes were staring at one of the pictures on the wall. Plum lips puckered up and ready to suck whatever was placed in her mouth's grasp.*

"What breakfast should have led to?" I muttered in response to whatever she was going to say against her feverish skin. "True, but watching you eat fruit is fucking hot."

"H-How?" She was surely testing me, and I seriously couldn't spend any more time getting lost in her floral cinder scent.

"I want that hot mouth around my cock, Alexandra." I got straight to the point before tugging at her ear lobe. "But we need to get moving."

"You said that five minutes ago," she muttered defiantly, and then moaned from the simple glide of my fingertips against her sensitive imprint.

Now that I knew just how aroused she got from something so simple, I'd been teasing her since our shared bath that had ended in a passionate shower as we washed up.

"And who's fault is it for tempting me so damn much this morning?" I inquired.

It wasn't like she was trying to seduce me, but since last night, I couldn't stop touching her.

*Taunting her, making sweet love to her, fucking her senseless.*

There was just something so strong brewing between us and I didn't know how to turn it off.

*No. I didn't want to turn it off.*

"I don't know," she grumbled, and it made me chuckle. Her shift in emotions was bringing new light into this relationship. I felt so calm in her company, especially when I had my hands on her. I could be myself with no strings attached, be a possessive fucker or completely sweet with a hint of shyness.

I wondered if she thought I was bipolar, but I thought she didn't mind the switches in my behavior. She wasn't complaining the way many did.

*You're too soft to be an Alpha.*

*You'll be king one day. You have to project your emotions more.*

*Your personality will make you self-destruct one day. Just wait.*

*I can't be with a boy like you.*

***You'll be a worthless king.***

"Maximus?"

I blinked out of my daze to see those orange eyes peering at me with hints of concern. My abrupt stop must have caught her attention, enough that she turned in my lap just so she could face me. Her hand reached out to brush my cheek as those observant orbs of amber sought a deeper meaning to my pause.

She didn't know how wolf life worked, let alone what the role was as a Luna, and yet she was showing me far more compassion than I'd expected.

*Was this what it's like to be in an actual relationship? A loving one that doesn't tear at my flesh and leave bruises and scars with each threat?*

"What's wrong?" she questioned, and her other hand lightly pressed on my other cheek as she leaned in close. I couldn't delve into this now. Not when we had to get things going for the pack's sake.

I'd been ignoring it, but I sensed approaching danger and if I didn't get my ass moving, there would be problems.

"There's no time to touch that topic, love," I whispered.

She wanted to say something, but she held her tongue as if taking a second to sense what I was picking up on in the atmosphere.

"Do you promise we'll discuss it?"

"We'll address it later," I assured her and lightly brushed my lips against

hers. "I promise."

It satisfied her enough that she nodded and turned around in my lap to quickly work on finishing the rest of her fruit. How easy it was for her to understand, to simply get that it wasn't the place or time. In the past, it felt like I couldn't fucking breathe without being harassed.

My arms tightened just a bit around her small waist, and she further relaxed into me as if sensing my need for her body. Just to have her in my grasp was enough to tame my demons within.

*Tame the spiraling negativity.*

When she finished eating, I waited for her to change as I stood at the window. The sky was dark as fuck, which wasn't a good sign when it should have been the middle of the day. Since returning, the heavy shadows in the air were rather suffocating, and the air itself held a dreadful feeling to its energy.

*We're not out of the woods yet.*

**"Alpha?"**

Hearing Yuki's voice brought a bit of relief for it confirmed she was also okay after the Void coma.

*Yes, Yuki?*

***"Your brothers and sister are investigating a disturbance on the outskirts of the south side. I think they'll need your assistance."***

The news made me frown as my body grew tense in anger. I disliked how vulnerable we were in these lands. The position may be safe from waves, but it wasn't fully equipped to handle a potential attack.

If this were on human soil, all I'd need was my brothers, but if we were going to deal with a potential pack attack, it would get messy with the kids arriving.

*Have the kids arrived?*

***"Yes, Alpha. Ten in total. They're strong, but they're a bit tired from the journey. Haku is with them in the back while we get the interior sleeping"***



***quarters in order. Edwin and Rafael have volunteered to assist to keep any enemies at bay. Clairvoyance will be here soon.*** "

*Claire's already in the United States?*

***"Sis passed the border before the previous wave but was stuck in lockdown with many of the officials at the airport. She's making her way down here, but she has to take the long route due to all the closures."***

Clairvoyance, or Claire for short, was Yuki's older sister. With Arwen in the dungeon, it would be helpful to have her around. As an added bonus, she was extremely good with children and could protect a whole lot of people if necessary - one of the reasons why she was hired by the prince who was currently residing in Dubai.

*Alright. I'll send Echo down to be extra defense if things get ugly. He can protect the children if Claire doesn't get here on time and things get out of hand. That will be the last resort though.*

***"Understood. Simon and I are aiding with preparations. Grayson predicts another wave."***

*Fuck. So soon?*

***"He's unsure. The sensation is odd. He believes Alexis would be able to predict it better."***

*I'll ask her. We've been a bit tied up.*

***"Hope that didn't involve ropes,"*** she tossed back with a hint of amusement in her usual monotone voice.

*Trust me. I wish it did.*

***"You've fallen smitten with her. I can tell."***

*Dangerously so.*

***"Your concern is rather obvious, Alpha."*** I knew she and Simon could sense my caution. They knew about Cynthia. Heck, they had endured watching me break into tiny pieces like shattered glass.

Without them, my family, and the pack's support, I would have given in to the tempting urge to give up. They were my rocks through it all, and they

wouldn't so easily let another woman take the reigns unless she was worth it.

*Alexandra is beginning to be worth the wait.*

***"She has pure intentions for you, Alpha. I can see it. Simon can see it. Her comrades encourage it. All I can say is that our Goddess is moving rather swiftly, don't you think?"***

*She is. There has to be a reason for it.*

***"I agree. It's to do with the swords. Sister stated so when I spoke to her briefly. It could be why the Senator is suddenly desperate to claim the Flamme sword in particular."***

*Any news on that?*

***"Simon is working on his connections to get more information on the two swords. They may be the reason why the banquet hasn't been canceled."***

*Great. More shit to deal with and the week isn't over yet.*

***"Do you wish for me to dismiss Grayson, Alpha?"***

*That piqued my interest as I began to think about it.*

*He doesn't wish to assist?*

***"I believe he's more torn as to where he stands with...well. You get it."***

*Funny how a woman's important when they're out of your grasp, but in your arms, you get far too comfortable thinking they'll always remain.*

I was sure he carried regret, as he should, but this wasn't a negotiable partnership. I didn't have any intention of sharing my mate, nor did he deserve her, frankly. Grayson had potential beyond his years, and yet he lacked due to his own insecurities.

*Let him stay for now. There aren't any safe places nearby anyway. I don't want Alexis thinking we got rid of him. Let her speak to him and then he can make his decision to go elsewhere. Alpha Rogue said he'll return after dealing with some family business and Alpha Surge is aiding with the healing process of the shifters across the city. Once we secure our lands, we can move on to preparing for the banquet.*

***"Understood, Alpha. I'll get to it."***

With a mental nod, she was out of my mental space. I sighed while thinking I should get ready myself, but I remained staring aimlessly at the window while that final scene of Eric being taken away by Cynthia flashed within my mind.

*I can't love a coward like you.*

*A fucking weak imbecile who can never do things right.*

*You, a king?!*

*I can have any man I desire.*

*One far worthier.*

*You think because you've inherited the sword that you'll become someone?*

*No one will fucking love you.*

*Not with what I've done.*

My hands curled into fists as the lump in my throat became obvious as I struggled to swallow it down. My breathing hitched, and it was like my entire vision was growing dark from the sudden plague of anxiety that rattled my body.

*Do you think anyone can love a Rejected King?*

*I think not.*

*Without the sword, you're worthless, unlovable, and will rot just like your heart, which is barricaded in ice.*

*No woman can love you. Absolutely no one-*

The tender touch to my back tugged me out of the memory, those venomous eyes of disgust fading away as warmth ran through my body from my head to my toes. I couldn't move as the press of lips lightly moved from the spot on my back to gently press along my spine. Each kiss made me moan

while the tension in my muscles began to fade, wave after wave.

When those thin arms wrapped around my waist, I felt Alexis's warmth.

"Maximus," she whispered. "I'm right here, Alpha. Can't you see?"

Her words tugged on my heartstrings as my shaky hands moved to lay upon hers that rested upon my stomach.

"I feel you, baby," I quietly breathed. "Sorry. I just..."

"Nothing to apologize for," she assured me. "No explanations. Just relax."

I smirked and felt Adam's presence in my mind. He was observing her emotions, the ripples of concern and spikes of relief that I was "present".

We stood there for a solid minute before I turned in her arms and hugged her back. She hugged me even tighter, and though I knew she wouldn't ask me for an explanation, I felt as if she understood what I was feeling.

*The raw heaviness that comes with rejection.*

"Thanks for being here, Alexandra." The words of gratitude left me before I could stop them.

Opening my eyes and looking down at her, I noticed her head lean back to meet my gaze as she smiled in loving compassion.

"I'm always here for you, Alpha," she reminded as if I'd forgotten, and maybe I had. Maybe I needed to see in the depths of those orange orbs that she was indeed here for me.

"I know," I whispered and kissed her.

*My loving Luna is here to banish all the traumatizing thoughts.*



## DIRECTIONAL BROTHERS AND SEER PRINCESS

~ALEXANDRA~

"THEY'RE EITHER HIDING, or they ran when we got close."

"Hmm, they wouldn't be cowards and run."

"They could have heard Maximus is back?"

"I highly doubt they're worried about our younger brother, boys."

Roza's voice caught my attention as Maximus led the way through the thick forest. We were closing in on a clearing that was on a cliff - the designated meeting spot that Max's siblings had decided upon.

Maximus had chosen my outfit, having Roza get me something that perfectly fit my style: a tight leather corset with a harness design for the straps, a black "skort" - *skirt with shorts beneath* - matched with fishnet pantyhose, stiletto heels, and my black fingerless gloves.

After a quick dash of matte black nail polish, I was feeling like my badass self ready to take on the fucking world.

Maximus was wearing black leather jeans with a bunch of zippers along the front sides and a black tank top with the words ALPHA KING in neon pink graffiti.

*Let's admit it. That was rather cute, especially when the colors matched*

*my overall appearance.*

His hair was up in another bun, the best style to not get in his way if we had to battle against this enemy pack that was taking advantage of the situation. Maximus explained that his pack was one of the royal packs that were new in this district, and it wasn't unusual for other packs to try and "shoo" them away before they laid their territory.

In Max's case, this territory had been bought and established for a while but because they hadn't fully migrated down here, none of the other packs really noticed.

What made things a big deal was that Maximus's pack was simply the north section of the pack - or the strongest. Each of his brothers held a directional part, which meant the Atlas pack was potentially four times the normal size.

Roza was the Seer of the pack and could foresee many things, including prophecies and life-changing events, like the last chaotic wave massacre as some were beginning to call it, but she was also a skilled healer and magic herbalist.

She was still recovering from her recent injuries, but with a few more days, she'd be back to normal.

Their parents, King and Queen Atlas, were in charge of all royal aspects. Or political bullshit, as I liked to call it. Maximus said they would be dealing with the details of the banquet, our attire, security, all that jazz.

I was still rather speechless at the fact that this banquet was still going on. Even with the chaos left behind, pack members were basically saying it wasn't "their" problem. This banquet wasn't for the ordinary people. It was clearly for the rich elites and royals who were looking at this as an opportunity to make alliances.

I was sure none of them knew of the alliance we'd made within the wave, and I wasn't sure if it was still currently valid now that we were out of that near-death scenario, but Max said Richard would be reuniting with us at the

banquet once he got his family problems in a row.

*Betrayal was such a big deal in wolf shifter land, and the fact that it was to work with the Dark Senator wouldn't sit well with any pack.*

I lightly squeezed Max's hand as we approached, slightly nervous at the idea of meeting his brothers. Roza was super nice and welcoming, but how would his brothers react to me?

There was something I hadn't figured out yet when it came to Maximus.

Deep within our connection was something dark – something wounded in nature that was struggling to heal. I couldn't figure it out. The sensations were a bit like what I felt five years ago when my life seemed to cascade down a slope of devastation, only Max's slope felt like it hadn't ended.

*It was still going on a downhill slide, and he was frightened that the continued pattern of heartache would ruin the present.*

Being connected to each other forced us to acknowledge each other's feelings. Unlike me, I felt like Max knew how to keep his hidden, which wasn't helping me in my task of trying to figure out what was wrong.

Time would help, but I truly wondered if we'd be given time to really get to know each other. As of now, we'd basically survived death at multiple angles in four days. Heck, by the end of the week, we'd be fucking married.

*Don't jinx yourself, Alexandra.*

If Eve wasn't sleeping, I would have asked her. She was resting, but she wasn't in deep enough realms of sleep because of the potential chance of an attack. As for Maeve, I hadn't even brought that up with Max.

I really yearned to, but that wasn't a "quick-fix" conversation to have with your mate.

*So much to fucking do.*

Max squeezed my hand, and he paused in his stride to look over his shoulder at me.

***"Are you okay?"***

I wasn't expecting his voice to flood my mind, the baritone question



making my heart skip while my body hummed in other areas.

*I forget we can communicate this way.*

He smirked slightly but continued to wait for the answer to his primary question.

*I'm okay, Max. Just a bit nervous.*

**"Don't worry too much,"** he urged. **"My brothers are good. Fucking psychos, but good."**

*That doesn't reassure me in the slightest.*

His mellow chuckle serenaded my mind, and I couldn't ignore the tingles that teased my flesh or the pulsing action happening down under.

**"You get aroused easily, Alexandra."**

*I-I do not! You just have one of those sexy, hunky voices that all females go hormonally gaga over because those are the types of tones you hear in porn! Especially those BDSM movies and stuff!*

**"You watch that?"**

My cheeks were scorching hot while the mere question made the list of private videos I had on my backup phone pop up in my mind.

I watched the way his eyes lit up with mischief while he tugged me swiftly against him.

*Max?! What are-*

My thought was cut off as he swung me around. Suddenly, I was pressed against the nearest tree - his hand around my throat while my arms were up and pinned by his other hand that held my wrists.

*How in the fucking world did I get into this position?*

**"Answer me, mate,"** Max growled in impatience, and I swore his wolf was riding up his ass for an answer.

*Yes! I watch that. What's the big deal?! Your brothers and sister are like steps away!*

**"Does that mean you want to be blindfolded while listening to sensual music, suspended over the bed as I eat your pussy out?"**

My jaw dropped at the example, my mind already ahead of the game as it all played out.

*Holy fucking shit.*

Max was pressing me against the bark of the tree behind me, his teeth lightly tugging my left earlobe before he whispered, "Be careful, Queen of Flames."

It was official. I was doomed to be fucked right here and now with Max's family literally steps away. My Alpha mate was rock hard, and I couldn't get my mind off of the "suspended in the air and eaten out" scenario.

"Maxi! Get your horny fucking ass out here with your mate or I'm going to ruin Mom's black dress and say you ripped it to shreds during your lustful activities!"

The harsh, irritated voice was loud and clear, and the way Max pouted in pure annoyance made me snicker.

"What are the chances that that's the eldest brother?" I whispered. He let go of my wrists and took an extra second before letting go of my throat.

"One hundred and ten percent," he huffed but met my eyes for an added second and very smoothly claimed my lips.

Compared to what we'd been taunting each other with, this kiss was cautious and slow, yet deep enough to tug you right in and leave you lost in the tranquil passion it delivered. It didn't make sense, and maybe it didn't have to, but I lost any intention of fighting against him.

"They're probably making out," a different voice offered and I could envision a smug smile on their face.

"Max! Move your ass. We don't have all day here," the third voice urged.

"You guys are just jealous assholes. Wait until you three meet your mates. Y'all are going to be gone for weeks!"

I broke the kiss knowing Max wouldn't, but kept close to him. My arms reached out to hook around his neck, and I pulled him down enough to go on my tiptoes and press my lips against the upper part of his neck, just below his

ear lobe.

His hands moved down my body and gripped my ass while I enjoyed kissing the spot until I was sure there was a bruised mark left behind. It was the first time I'd intentionally left a hickey on his flesh, and I really didn't have reason for it.

Pulling back, I stared into his eyes, which danced with various emotions that I couldn't decipher fast enough. But overall, it felt like he approved of it.

"Let's get this done so we can spend time together. Just you and me," I offered with a loving smile. He mimicked my grin and slowly nodded, and with a tight squeeze, we pulled away and headed towards the open clearing - hand in hand.

Entering the clearing, I picked up on Roza first. She was in another white dress, a longer one that made her look like a maiden while her hair was in large, bountiful curls that made it a bit shorter.

She wore white shoes that gave me ballerina vibes because of the white ribbons that wrapped around her legs, and her makeup was simple with a touch of pink gloss. Her smile was priceless as she waved at us, and that allowed me to move my gaze to the trio standing in waiting.

*Oh shit.*

I thought Max was big, but no. That was a very big error of judgment. His older brothers had to be a part of the damn Russian mafia or some shit because they were probably taller than Richard.

The two on the far right looked almost identical, both of them standing at 6'8". If it wasn't for the fact one of them had white hair like Maximus and the other had pure black hair, it would be difficult to tell them apart.

They both wore tank tops, their muscles on display as they were both crossing their arms. They had black shorts, tattoos along their arms and upper thighs, and black running shoes that completed their looks.

The remaining brother had blond hair, which was uniquely different from his brothers, and his physique was similar to Maximus's. He definitely gave

off a younger vibe in comparison to the two on the left, and his attire was on the colorful side with a yellow tank top and blue shorts. He finished off the look with white Converse. His hair wasn't short like the other two, more past his shoulders like a surfer dude. He didn't have any visible tattoos. In fact, he gave off model vibes.

One thing they all shared was the same type of eyes - icy blue orbs with the obvious snowflake in the middle.

Surfer brother smiled in greeting as he took me in first - *and whistled*.

"Well fuck. Did you bribe the Moon Goddess up high to bring you a fallen angel from wolf paradise?"

"Is that even a compliment?" the brother with white hair complained.

"He's basically saying brother brought home a hot girl who's ready to sin," the black-haired brother noted.

"If it interests you, Alpha Rogue calls me Fallen Beauty," I voiced with a shrug. "Seems like a similar pattern."

"Fallen Beauty," the blond brother repeated. "Yup! That hits right on."

"Can y'all fuck off," Maximus huffed and looked over to his sister. "Hey, Roza. Thanks for everything."

"Certainly, Max. Afternoon, Alexis. How are you adapting?"

"Attempting to," I replied. "Can't really adapt when everything is changing like crazy."

"Good point." Roza sighed. "But you know what's not changing? The fact that Arwen's still in the dungeons and maybe staying there until we can send him to prison."

"Huh?" Max and I said in unison.

"Why?" Max further inquired but didn't seem too troubled by the news.

"Looks like he had connections to whatever Eric was plotting," surfer brother replied. "Took beating him up until one of his lungs collapsed to get the truth out of him."

"Fun," I commented but frowned. "Is there anyone else you're wary of?"

I was asking in general, and blond brother answered, "No. Eric and Arwen were the two assholes always causing trouble for us. Makes sense now if Arwen's misdeeds are brought to light."

I could feel Max's uneasiness with the revelation, but all I could do was tighten my hold around his hand and hope we could deal with it later.

"We should introduce ourselves," surfer brother announced. "Mason Atlas. Third in line."

He pointed to the white-haired brother, who continued, "Maddox. Eldest. And no. Maverick and I aren't twins. We just look the fuck alike because he can't be original."

"Fuck you," Maverick snapped back, then continued, "Maverick. I hate talking. Leave me alone."

"Bother you the most. Got it," I concluded.

"What?" Maverick huffed.

"If you're going to point out the obvious fact that you're an anti-social jerk, that just encourages me to bug you more. That's obvious. Don't you watch drama shows?"

Max snickered, while Mason was laughing and Maddox was smiling in amusement. Roza giggled and shook her head. "Yup. Alexis is gonna fit right in."

Max pulled me into his side as he rested an arm on my shoulders.

"This is Alexis. We'll get into the details of who she is later. Just know she's royal blood and has a knack with fire," he introduced, and I swore the temperature dropped. "Bully her and I'll fuck your lives up."

"Well shit." Mason moved to hide behind Maverick who looked irked, while Maddox was the less affected brother of the three.

"So you're serious about her," Maddox concluded.

"Great," Maverick huffed. "He's gonna freeze my balls first."

"Freeze your nuts?" I asked. "That's a punishment?"

"Trust me, sister-in-law," Mason emphasized. "It's like a death sentence."

Imagine already dealing with heavy ball sacks and then they're frozen into massive balls of ice that make it look like you took a dump in your trunk while you waddle around like a fucking penguin. EMBARRASSING!"

"So I'll just assume you've all experienced it once," I concluded.

"Yes," the three of them groaned.

"Because boys are stupid and don't think before they act until they're fucked. Never see girls getting their pussies frozen," Roza joyfully revealed.

I laughed at the mere thought and shook my head. "Goddess KNOWS that would be an interesting punishment," I said and laughed.

"I love how this is amusing to you," Max noted as he watched me. I looked up to give him a sly grin. "Go ahead. Freeze my pussy. Perfect ice cream treat. Not only would it be an intriguing experience, but I'd also let a certain someone lick that wall of ice until they could enjoy the creamy portion of the frozen dessert."

All of them gawked - *literally every sibling* - before Max began to blush but leaned in to whisper, "Only if you suck my popsicle."

"Oh, Alpha. I can do **more** than suck," I purred and innocently batted my eyes.

"Give me holy water for my damn eyes!" Maverick begged.

"Yup. They're destined for one another," Mason announced. "Thank our Goddess. Means we got a shot at finding someone as cool as Alexis."

"It would be a blessing if anyone could handle one of us," Maddox concluded.

"You guys are too..." Roza trailed off and suddenly her eyes went blank before they blared with white light. We all froze, and I knew without a doubt Roza was having a vision.

The four guys focused on their sister as she began to move her hands swiftly to sign. I was trying to keep up with the swift, blurred movements of her hands, but the hairs on my arms began to rise and the tattoo on my arm began to burn in warning.

***"Direct attack on Roza! To the left. Shift!"***

When Eve ordered you to do something, you didn't hesitate - *or think* - you just moved and asked questions later because one delayed second could be the end of multiple people's lives.

I darted to the left and shifted after two sprinting steps, pushing off the ground and transforming mid-air just as a large black wolf came into my view.

Cracking bones announced the crunching clash of my ivory teeth as they sank into the wolf's flesh - igniting a painful howl from the enemy wolf. The impact shifted the enemy wolf's course, the two of us crashing into the ground and spinning because my stubborn ass wouldn't let go until he stopped fucking breathing.

*Stupid move.*

It didn't click in my mind until we were rolling off the fucking cliff, but I was already conducting my next move: burning this fucking invader even if it was my last deed.

Its whimpering howl was loud enough to echo all around as we began to fall, but something caught onto the back of my neck with enough force that my wolf body whipped back, and the enemy's flesh ripped entirely.

The screeching whimper got farther and farther away as I took in the flaming wolf that was essentially burning to ash while falling to its doom. I let go of the patch of skin that was already lit up with my ruthless fire, and I spat out the nasty blood in my mouth.

My body dangled until my ears caught onto the "splat" sound that concluded that our risky wolf was one with the earth, giving me the opportunity to lift my head up to try to see who was holding me.

Instead, I was moving and being carried a few large steps away from the cliff like a cub in its parent's grasp, only I knew exactly who held me now that I let my wolf senses go wild.

Poor guy didn't stand a chance when I wiggled out of his hold, dropped to

the floor, and made a U-turn straight into tackling the wolf that was clearly double the size of my flaming wolf. He went down unexpectedly, and I yelped happily before I circled the large white wolf with flames, beginning to rub my body all over him.

"Oh goodness. Is she marking him?" It took me a second to identify the voice as Maverick.

"She is." The calmer voice was Maddox.

"I love how neither of you are frightened shitless about the fact that our sister almost got attacked!" Mason noted.

"Ugh. What just happened?" Roza moaned before there was a moment of silence. "Is that Alexis's wolf? Wait. Is she humping Max's leg?"

"Yup," the other three brothers announced.

I really wasn't paying attention to what I was doing since I never really lost control like this. Rarely did I let the "wolf predator" side of me out to be free, but now it was on a freedom ride, which explained the marking, scenting, and humping.

"Max is just standing there like he can't comprehend what's going on," Maverick complained.

"Can you blame him?" Maddox offered. "Hard to figure out what's happening."

"Well, I mean, he can't really move with a circle of fire around him. Like, he's within a burning witch pit," Mason pointed out. "Shit. Sis? Are you okay?"

"Ugh. My head hurts," Roza complained. "Fuck. We have to get down to the South House now."

"Why?" Maverick and Maddox asked in unison.

"A wave is coming," Roza stressed.

"This part doesn't get waves," Mason noted.

"Well something is coming and no way are the children going to survive a wave."



"Oh shit," Maverick cursed. "The children don't know where the wave shelter is located."

"We have one?" Mason hastily questioned.

"Yes. It's not super big, but more than enough to secure the children," Maddox emphasized.

"Max, reel in your mate already," Maverick huffed.

I was currently pawing at his side, happily panting at the idea of annoying him. I knew we had more important things to do, or at least that small, insignificant part of my human brain was reminding me that we really needed to go, but it felt so nice to fall into this mindset where all I had to care about was my mate.

He observed me for a long minute before beginning to lick my face like he was grooming me. I yelped in excitement and began running around him again, making our observers stare at us helplessly.

"Did Max go to fucking sleep or something?" Maverick dryly asked. "He's acting like a fucking wolf."

"I mean..." Mason began.

Maverick added, "Don't go correcting me with logic! We need our brother and not his unconscious wolf side."

"Adam's probably sleeping due to them just coming back from the last wave," Maddox noted.

"Neither of them have seen each other in wolf form," Roza revealed like it was a fact.

"Shit..." the three of them replied.

Mason followed with, "And she's humping him again."

"Ugh. Better do this the hard way," Maverick declared and my senses picked up on the static shock within the atmosphere. I rolled onto my four legs and moved to stand in front of my love baring my teeth.

"Maverick," Maddox groaned. "You're making her mad."

"She really isn't a submissive wolf, Maverick. She has no issue ripping

you shreds with those teeth of hers."

"She wouldn't go injuring her Alpha's brother," Maverick huffed.

"Now you're just being stupid," Mason declared and laughed.

"We don't have time for this," Maverick emphasized, and a loud crackling spark went past me. All my wolf could do was stare at its passage before slowly turning back to the middleman who stood there with a serious expression on his face.

"Stop playing around and switch back!" he ordered.

I didn't need to fully think as a switch flicked in my mind - and I missed his body by a mere nanosecond.

"Fuck!" Maddox cursed as he'd been the culprit to push my prey out of my line of attack. I spun around as I landed, and my eyes narrowed on Maverick and Maddox. Flames of orange and black burst out of my flesh, crackling through the tense air as the temperature spiked at my command.

"See what you did?" Roza didn't even sound sorry for Maverick or Maddox, who was basically a second target.

"I'm just gonna sit this one out," Mason concluded.

"Fuck! Maximus! Stop your fucking mate already!" Maverick snapped, but my Alpha was calmly sitting there and observing like he really couldn't care less about his brothers. I felt the urge to prove to him that I was powerful overtaking my senses, and I tackled into someone in a blur of movement.

Waves of ice tried to cover my body to disable me, but a blazing howl rippled through the air as my flames surged out of my body and melted the frost restraints. Shaking out my body, I moved my head in the direction of the culprit – Maddox, who was in a defensive position as his locks glowed like a white highlighter.

I growled and got close to the floor, making him curse before he looked at Max.

"Maximus! Stop being a douche and calm your mate!" he snapped.

I was already pushing off the ground and soaring through the air, but

actual arms caught me, while the scent of cinder with hints of smoke tickled my nose. I went from murderous to happily howling as I wiggled in the arms of my dragon hybrid comrade.

"Who the hell are you?" Maverick asked.

"The one that stopped our Inferno princess from murdering your brother," Rafael announced as his dragon wings further outstretched. He slowly lowered us to the ground. He dropped me with ease, and I was at his feet, sniffing his ankles before wagging my tail and happily moving from side to side while my eyes were staring at him with playful excitement.

"You haven't shifted into your wolf form like this in a good while, Alexis," Rafael noted as he knelt down on one knee. I rolled onto my back for him to rub my stomach. I really did feel like a puppy more than a wolf. My protective flames extinguished as I continued panting happily. "Maeve is asleep, isn't she? You don't normally fall into your natural instincts."

"WOOF!" I answered and continued enjoying the belly rub.

The cracking bones to my left didn't disturb me as I was lost in the rubbing feeling that was hitting an itching spot, but the voice that followed caught my attention. I was up and running to his feet a second later.

"That was far harder than I expected," Max announced but knelt down to greet me as I ran to crash into him. He didn't fall, unlike before, holding me in his bulky arms as I licked his face again and again while I rubbed my furry face against the side of his head. "Alexis, baby. You're too happy. Calm down."

"Better than attempting murder," Maverick huffed. "What the fuck took you so long to take control? Where's Adam?"

"Resting," Max replied, still calm as ever as he shrugged. "It's your fault. She could have humped my leg the entire time and not bothered anyone, but no. You had to charge the atmosphere and threaten her like she couldn't kick your ass."

"She wouldn't be able to defeat me," Maverick argued.

"Can we take bets after we secure the children?" Mason offered. "The air is thick."

That got the others' attention as Rafael put his hands on his hips. "A wave is coming fast. Edwin sent me here because he felt Alexis's shift. Beta Yuki is attempting to make a barrier, but she needs help."

"Where's Grayson?" Max questioned as Mason approached us. I paused in licking Max's face to stare at Mason as he came to a stop and knelt down with an offered hand.

"He's trying to predict which way the wave is coming from but to no avail. He's worried it may not be a wave but a decoy."

That made everyone nervous, and even I paused in my approach to Mason as the concern for the children's safety ticked in my mind.

*I should shift back...*

The resolve was clear, but I took advantage of my final playful moments to close the distance between myself and Mason and nudge his hand just to get a scratch behind my ear.

"You're good at protecting your man," Mason praised. "And thank you for protecting Roza."

"Ah," Roza gasped before she walked right over to my left side and reached out to pet my back as well. "Thank you, Alexis. Seriously. My brothers have slow reaction times."

"Hey!" all four of them commented while Rafael laughed.

"Our Goddess knew our minds could never process multiple things at once unless in the bedroom. That's why it's advised to have a partner who can react faster than we can to aid us."

"How does that apply to you and Edwin though?" she genuinely inquired, and I triggered my shift and greeted them with my burst of laughter as her comment registered in my brain.

"SEE! It's clear as fucking day," I began and turned over to see Rafael's slightly red face. "You two need to date!"

"That's how you respond after surviving death, humping and scenting our brother, and trying to kill me and Maddox?!" Maverick snapped and pointed at me. I was glad these clothes were shift-proof, which was the only reason I wasn't butt naked.

I shrugged like it wasn't a big deal and flicked my pink strands to add a dose of sass.

"First off, Maximus is MY mate. Meaning, if I want to hump, scent, lick, or fuck him, I most certainly can!" I literally got up, waltzed over to Max, and tugged the collar of his tank top to bring him down for a ferocious kiss.

"Oh, she's **CONFIDENT**," Mason noted, and I could hear Rafael's low chuckle.

"Alexis has never been the one to be shy when it comes to demonstrating her love. Once she's comfortable with you, you better have the confidence to portray your love for the world to see."

I smirked which broke the kiss, and I gave Max a quirky grin with an added wink. With a spin, I returned to my point as I waltzed over to Maverick and got right into his space to continue.

"Second of all, I didn't have the intention to kill you. Well...maybe you." I poked his chest before moving my accusing finger over to Maddox, who stared at me as if he were bored out of his mind. "I would have spared you, only because you probably wouldn't care if you died."

"She's got a point there," Mason voiced with a smug grin.

I crossed my arms and got to my final point, knowing we were rather pressed on time.

"Finally, I would have survived death regardless. Do you really think Maximus would have let me die? I have trust in him. If I actually fell over the edge, he would have thought of something to get to me. Therefore, my survival isn't in question."

Maverick stared back at me like I'd said something completely distraught, while Roza, Mason, and Maddox were staring at me with a similar expression

- to the point that I wondered if I spoke in the wrong language.

"Um...did I speak in the wrong language?"

"You didn't, Alexis," Rafael confirmed, standing further to my left as he seemed to observe the confrontational moment.

I wasn't sure why he seemed rather proud of me, especially when my response wasn't so outstanding, but large arms wrapped around me, hugging my slim frame while I lifted my head up to see Max's peaceful expression.

When our eyes locked, his eyes danced with a flicker of happiness that melted away the lack of emotion in those snowflake orbs. His smile didn't show his teeth, but it was wide enough to light his entire face and make my heart literally stop for a few seconds at the stunning view.

"You spoke perfectly, Queen of Flames," he rasped and very lightly kissed my lips. "We need to go."

All I could do was nod before he released me, but his hand sought mine and we began swiftly walking back into the forest with the others in tow.

I'd gotten a glimpse of Max's siblings, but I wondered if Maximus's past relationships were tragic in nature. I took no offense to Maverick's attitude, since it gave me protective vibes, but why?

*Who shattered Max's heart?*



## CAN'T WE STILL BE FRIENDS AND EMOTIONALLY SHATTERED

"Where's Grayson?!" I called out to one of the knight guards aiding with the evacuation of staff members. I recognized their green hair that reminded me of emeralds, which was why I somehow remembered him from the mass of knights from the Void expedition.

"Inside speaking with someone on the phone, Luna," he obediently replied, though I was taken aback by the Luna title.

I wasn't sure if it were basically hovering above my head or pack members and acquaintances knew who I was now, but I'd have to figure that out later. I nodded in understanding and ran into the main health building where Rafael and the rest had woken up after the expedition.

We arrived to witness the panicked evacuations happening within the South Atlas building as well as the health center, training building, and the pack outdoor sector where most of the shifter kids should have been waiting to be transferred to the safe house.

*However, two of them were missing, which had Max and his brothers on a goose chase to find them before the wave arrived.*

If we evacuated everyone fast enough, we could potentially avoid it altogether, but that meant finding these kids, and Grayson would be the fastest at doing that. His wolf was a pro at finding people and used to be taken on expeditions to find a bunch of missing people in wave territories.



That was what he'd done before he got gigs with the royals.

Anyone under eighteen wouldn't survive the waves. They were far too unpredictable and without a strong shifter background, the risk was simply too great. Obviously, not every shifter could be a victim of the wave, but none of us could take that chance.

*I'd rather risk being pulled into the wave than an innocent child.*

There was something about kids that tugged at my soul and made me want to help them any way I could. They were so innocent and didn't deserve to be plagued with something as traumatic as these waves.

They had already had their close calls, Edwin having protected the group from the remaining assassins that were hiding out in the forest, trying to get the upper hand by taking a few of the kids as hostages.

I guessed the purpose of that random wolf attacking Roza was to be a distraction so we wouldn't be able to arrive on time to help the children, but Rafael had encouraged Edwin to stay behind with Beta Simon and Beta Yuki.

I trusted Edwin to ensure the children were all secured in the safe house with the Betas. He wouldn't stay with them because no way would he let me get sucked into a wave if he couldn't be my backup, but I really hoped we could avoid this wave entirely.

As much as I wanted to act like I was fine and dandy, I really wasn't right now. I was still recovering from the previous wave and the energy spent on the sword. Adding the very few hours of sleep I'd experienced, my body was still aching, my magic levels low, and Eve was still lingering between the realms of sleep and wakefulness.

I was going to try and suffice with just my physical abilities and a dose of whatever magic I had left, using Eve as my last resort. With no knowledge of how to summon the Sword of Royale Flamme, that was off the usage block until I figured it out.

Entering the building with a shove of the front doors, I raced through the main medical room before I overheard Grayson's voice.

"This isn't the time! I'm dealing with work and a potential evacuation with an unexpected wave. You can't possibly be listening to some fucking source telling you that I'm Eric's accomplice! I was fucking there, amidst the battle, when he tried to kill all of us. Why would you possibly listen to some phony word of mouth when you can ask Alpha Surge, Alpha Rogue, or even Alpha Maximus for verbal confirmation of my participation?!"

There were a few seconds of silence before wind rushed into the room, lifting the papers and making them spin around Grayson as he yelled, "Again with the fucking threatening! She's NOTHING to me, dammit! How many fucking times do I have to repeat myself? She has no relation to any organization in connection to yours and yet every single chance you get, you ask me about Alexis! Do you have a fucking obsession? If so, get rid of it because I'm tired of this group of selfish bastards trying to use me to get to her! Did you simply upgrade me in hopes she'd join in as an Expeditioner? Thought she'd be an advantage for you now that the reward for delivering a pink-haired woman is up to 2 billion?"

I wanted to interrupt but it felt like I was getting all the juicy details on a topic that clearly revolved around me.

"For Goddess's sake, Roman, I don't know who the queen of the Inferno wolves is! I've done the research for you guys for five fucking years, and guess what? None of it has pointed to Alexis! Are you guys blind or something? You really think Alexis is royalty because she has a banging hot body and sidekicks? She could be a slut for all you know, and yet you're trying to emphasize that she's royalty. You're fucking mad."

I took a step back, followed by another, until I'd moved to the corner next to a pillar that was next to two crash carts. Blending into the shadows as I pressed my back against the pillar's surface, I tried to calm my heartrate and the rush of blood that pumped loud enough to make my ears ring.

My ears picked up on Grayson's pacing, and with a huff, he revealed what I was frightened of hearing - *scared shitless of accepting*.

"We weren't fucking lovers, alright?! Yes, we fucked! I got to enjoy being with the 'hot girl' when all you shitheads said I'd be fucking useless and a loner forever! Just because we were friends with benefits, that doesn't mean I loved her! I need a modest woman. One with nice long hair, and who wears dresses that don't show so much skin. A nice girl who's shy and quiet, who will let me feel like a damn man and doesn't overpower me! Alexis doesn't fit any of that! She's dominant as fuck, independent, and doesn't rely on anyone. She shows off her skin and has tattoos! She's just not my damn type, okay?! I don't know how many times I have to explain that to you and the rest of your lot. I don't need to explain myself when I'm a benefit to YOUR pack. I've done everything I could in the last five years to prove my worth. To show I'm not a damn weakling. Are you literally going to let Eric's fuck-ups tarnish my position in OUR pack? He's the one who betrayed every pack connection. I was fucking loyal and did every mission you asked of me. All the rescues. All the expeditions to find artifacts. I served my time doing the dirty work! I committed to your mafia sanction and tried to get leads on Maximus. I've done everything you've asked of me to learn about this damn queen. What more do you want?"

There were no words to express how I felt, and I wondered if this was my friend, Grayson.

*My friend. The man with whom I spent nights within his arms or enjoyed blissful mornings, sharing a talkative breakfast. Have I been with a stranger this entire time?*

There was so much that needed to be dissected from his statements, but my mind was already summarizing the obvious: Grayson...used me?

"Listen. I NEED to go. I can't be caught right now, and Alexis actually may need my help with shit. I'm still her friend and can't just abandon her in this situation. Once things are wrapped up after this wave, summon me for a different job. It can be anything. Fuck, I can be a damn assistant or Expeditioner for someone else. I just can't be around these royals who belittle

my worth. Find me someone who will put me to good use or some shit. Anything."

Another silence left him huffing. "You're right and that's why I want space." I could hear the laughter coming from the speaker's end and Grayson sighed.

"If it's going to help you get more info on Eric, go ahead. Continue spreading the word. Fuck, I don't care, man. She ain't a queen. If anything, like the rumors state, she's a Rejected Queen, seeing as Eric was her mate. He was supposed to be king but rejected her because she was a whore or whatever he used to brag about when drunk. Do whatever you want but hold up your end of the deal. This is my last assignment and I'm done. Sell the penthouse. I don't need those memories. I'll leave NYC if I have to. Just ensure I'm still in the pack and that those rumors Eric is spreading get terminated. Do that and I'll do whatever shit you need."

He was silent for longer than expected, but I was immobile as I sat there in a state of paralysis.

"I don't know how to retrieve the sword from Maximus. I've tried prior, but I think it's gotten stronger. I don't know why. It's like its power has doubled. It apparently was used to keep us alive when I was in a coma, which was a nuisance in itself. I couldn't see whether that hired tracker was able to get the fire sword. I highly doubt his magic was capable, but seeing as I haven't heard from him, he's probably burnt to a crisp. It's not a big deal. I know it's on the market. All we need is that. It's connected to the ice sword so it'll be far easier to get Maximus off guard and take it from him. Just two swords would be more than enough to beat the Dark Senator. I'll go treasure hunting once things have calmed down. Then, we'll look for this Inferno Queen's throne. It's somewhere in the waves. We just have to find it and retrieve the crown hidden within the throne. Then we'll be the highest on the chain of hierarchy."

He chuckled and sighed. "Hey. I'm not evil. We simply want our own

power. No more being simps in this game of chess. The royals are pushing for this banquet to make a game plan against what's coming and these fire waves, but I'm done being stomped upon by rich bastards and bitches because they were born to rule. I was born to fucking rise, and no way am I falling."

I couldn't fathom words as he cursed. "Fuck. The wave is too close. I can sense it. Listen, I'll detour this one. Make some stupid excuse that I was called for an emergency with an injured royal or something. Yes, yes, I'll pay y'all back later! Got it." He spoke quickly before he whispered, "Yup. If they bring up Alexis as a potential, mock the idea and label her Rejected Queen. They'll laugh and move onto someone worthier of actual royalty. All she's good for is sex."

It felt like I was stabbed in the heart. I struggled to simply breathe as my fingers clenched inward and my fists shook.

"Shut up. You'd fuck her if you had the chance. I'm out. If you can, also work on getting me into that banquet as an assistant. We gotta know what they're planning. Cool. See ya."

He huffed in relief. "How do I tell Alexis I'm leaving? Fuck. It doesn't even matter. She's with that royal jackass now. I'm just a nobody to her. She should just forget about us. Would give me peace of mind. Shit. I need to go."

Racing footsteps followed, further pushing me to hide amongst the shadows as my eyes locked onto his figure passing by the pillar. Maybe I mentally hoped it wasn't him. That he was just an illusion or a facade to test me like how Maximus had tested me to be his Luna, but his features were identical to Grayson's, as was his aura that was rising to help him get away from the wave.

I couldn't move as it finally settled in.

*Grayson...used me?*

The blow was harsher than a simple slap in the face or jab at my arm. It hit me mentally as my head pounded in rebellion and I felt Eve's energy run through me in an attempt to tame whatever was happening from the inside.

**"Alexandra. It's...it's okay."** Poor Eve probably didn't know how to aid me. The last time I'd felt this heartache was that fateful night. But why did this hurt even more? Why did it weigh a fucking ton versus the brick of pain I'd endured with Eric?

Back then, the blow was hard because of everything that followed from that moment of rejection, but this...this hurt like I'd been shot multiple times through the heart and I had to stand here and let every ounce of blood flood out of me.

I couldn't breathe - *did I deserve to* - as his words of mockery flooded my brain.

*We weren't lovers.*

*Alexis doesn't fit any of that!*

*She's dominant as fuck, independent, and doesn't rely on anyone. She shows off her skin and has tattoos! She's just not my damn type, okay?!*

*She ain't a queen. If anything, like the rumors state, she's a Rejected Queen, seeing as Eric was her mate. He was supposed to be king but rejected her because she was a whore.*

*If they bring up Alexis as a potential, mock the idea and label her Rejected Queen.*

*All she's good for is sex.*

***She should just forget about us.***

How do you forget about someone you thought you could trust with five years of your life? Ya, I didn't trust him enough to tell him about my heritage, but maybe this was why. My instincts were warning me that I couldn't give him everything, and here I stood.

*A complete fucking fool.*

**"Alexandra?"** Max's voice entered my head, but it felt so far away, like a distant echo. Was it due to the whirlwind of noise brewing within my subconscious? Or the emotional turmoil that was ripping me to shreds from the inside out?

It felt like I was dying, as dramatic as that sounded, but the truth hurt so much, I didn't know what to do. I didn't know how to feel. I was unsure how to escape all of this.

***"Alexandra, baby. What's wrong? Where are you?"*** I was sure Max could feel it. The internal downfall of a Rejected Queen. That's what I was now, right? A Rejected Queen who let her kingdom fall and was now a slutty whore because she trusted someone like Grayson.

*I'm...not worthy of him. My way of dressing, my tattoos, my overpowering attitude...I'm not his type. Yet...he was okay with fucking me? Okay with getting me flowers, making me breakfast, waiting for me after wave expeditions. He disliked me so much, yet he was able to play this role of friends with benefits for five years...*

***Yet, I'm the bad guy. I'm the Rejected Queen who's only good for sex.***

I felt Max's spike of worry now as his voice of urgency cut through the fog forming within my mind.

***"Alexandra! What's going on?! Maverick and I are coming for you. A wave is coming. My Queen of Flames, please. Tell me where you are so I can get there quicker."***

His pleading should have comforted me. I should have used it to remind myself that I was still loved. That someone still loved me. And yet the thought of him seeing me like this frightened me to my very core.

To see me so defeated over someone I knew wasn't ready for commitment.

I knew this. I'd mentally prepared for the idea of breaking up, especially with Maximus entering my life unexpectedly, but there was a big difference between confronting a person to end things versus hearing behind your back that you were nothing to them.

*That they disliked your sense of fashion, your personality, the markings on your flesh, and despised royals.*

To him, I was a fuck toy. One he didn't have to beg or pay for. When I

thought I was tucked within a house of safety, I'd been sleeping outdoors for the world to mock me. He was helping to ruin my reputation. Assisting in ruining my name as if I were plagued with a title I didn't deserve.

*What made him any different from my enemies?*

My shaking body crouched down until I sat helplessly on the floor, my trembling hands moving through my hair to cradle my pounding head while I fought for breath.

This wasn't the first time people had let me down. Many individuals throughout my life had shunned me for rank, money, popularity. My whole childhood I'd been surrounded by fake people, so this shouldn't have fazed me in the slightest.

I smiled at the thought - so wide that it would surely hurt my cheeks if I kept it up, but nothing could halt the streams of tears that rolled down my cheeks.

*Nothing could shield me from hurting.*

How much more could I withstand in this constant cycle of challenges? How could I trust enough simply to get hurt again? Was this all my doing because I was weak? Or did I just deserve this for being someone's friend?

*I guess we can't be friends. No...we're no longer anything close to lovers. We're enemies. And I'm now left being emotionally shattered.*





## PRICE OF AGONY AND REJECTED DESTINY

"Maew?"

Despite the pounding force happening within my mind, the gentle call reached my ears. I zoned all other noises out. Max's calls faded away as I blocked out the world around me.

My attention was focused on what sat at my feet. My head lifted from my knees to admire the blurry image of the small black kitten.

Pink eyes bored innocently into mine, a spark of excitement flickering through them at the chance of getting my attention. The sight of Echo made more tears well in the hollows of my eyes.

"Gray...Gray..." I couldn't even fathom saying his name, and I felt like Echo understood as he reached out to pat my ankle with his paw.

"Maew."

I cracked a smile, even as tears spilled down my flush cheeks and my senses began to tingle with the approaching wave. A second glance at my pink wolf head tattoo confirmed that the wall leading to the world of Void Mastery was here and it would only be a matter of time before I was sucked into its hold.

The problem now was that I didn't have any motivation to go through another day of being in the wave. Another journey of fighting and defending myself when I felt so defeated. I had someone I trusted basically tear my

image apart behind my back, and though I knew I was stronger - *better, wiser, more deserving than to let a man break me* - I couldn't fight against this hurt.

*This painful rawness that I fought to control. To bundle it up and deal with it later.*

Maybe that was the true problem.

I didn't want to have to bury this pain away to feel later. I was tired of doing that. Of packing the pain like it deserved into a decorative box within the space I should have reserved for cherished memories.

It wasn't fair that one wrongful experience against me should crucify all the good changes I had waiting for me with people who loved me for who I was.

Max was pleading to reach me, and I could only assume he was the reason why Echo was here when I needed someone to help me through this agonizing pain. Was it fair to push him away because my trust had once again been broken?

Push away a man that had shown more love to me in the past five days than these men that either rejected me on the spot or faked caring about me for their own selfish games?

Max didn't deserve to struggle to get me when I could feel his intentions. I knew he wanted to give me his all, and that he'd be capable of filling in all the holes in my heart that needed mending.

It wouldn't take a day, or a week, or even a month. It may take years even, to mend my shattered heart, but deep down I knew he was willing to dedicate any amount of time if it meant we'd be together.

*We'd been destined to be with one another in our past lives, right? I can't let this ruin us in this life.*

"I wish I could forget him," I whispered and hung my head in shame before pressing it against my knees and tightening my arms around my legs to make me smaller. "Forget him. Forget Eric. Fuck...I don't deserve all this

fucking baggage! I'm so damn tired of it! I want to move forward! I want to focus on what matters! To find the path back to my rightful throne and let all of them see me! The Inferno Queen! Reject me. Shatter me. Fucking ruin me and the reputation of our kind. But then they'll have no choice but to see me. Acknowledge me. Bow down to me! I'll rule my way. Be surrounded by people I can wholeheartedly trust and create a kingdom that won't be segregated. We'll be more than just a land of supernaturals. We'll be a pack. A loving group that will aid one another and fight as a whole to rise to the very top. I'll make a new destiny for myself and make all those who hurt me regret it."

I bit my lip so hard I cut through the surface and got a taste of my blood. I craved for it to be the blood of my enemies. To spill it all and let my smiling face be the last thing they saw before death came knocking on their door.

"Is that what you wish, Your Majesty?"

My eyes shot open as my head lifted to see the tall man before me, bowed upon one knee.

The slender man wore a fitted black suit with pink pinstripes. His top hat had a pink clock that ticked counterclockwise and was surrounded by pink flowers. His aura was black like inky shadows, but pink energy outlined his frame, and he carried a bouquet of strikingly pink roses with black stems.

His black strands peeked out from beneath his hat with hints of pink tinsel, the combination the complete opposite of those thrilling pink eyes with black rings around his irises. He had flawless skin with an umber complexion and a smile that flooded with compassion.

His long tale of furry pink buzzed to the side with black sparks, confirming who this was.

"Echo."

"This wasn't the way I'd have liked to introduce myself, Your Majesty," he whispered as he continued to offer the bouquet of flowers to me. I couldn't help but accept them as I tried to blink away my tears that flowed like a

never-ending river.

"But I wish to grant you a chance at redemption."

"Redemption?" I whispered the single word like it was forbidden.

His smile spread into a wide grin, showing his white teeth, while his eyes glimmered with determination.

"I carry a gift. A very dangerous gift. One that isn't so merciful to the receiver as it is to the giver. But I like you," he began as he briefly closed his eyes. "You awaken a side of Maximus that I haven't seen since his heart was broken, and he's coming out of that shell and only you can help him reach his greatest potential. Therefore, I'll give you a bargain you'll surely approve of."

Reaching out to wipe away a tear that rolled down my cheek, he rose up to his full height and looked down, then lifted his arms up as the wall of dancing oranges and pinks made itself visible.

*Only to come to a dramatic stop.*

"You...you can stop waves?"

"I can do a lot of things," he said with a kind-hearted expression. "Only everything has a price. That isn't everyone's cup of tea, especially not the Dark Senator's."

"You've...worked for him?"

"Not per se," he admitted. "He seeks my loyalty, and frankly, I like Maximus's side of the woods far better. He treats my kind with respect and doesn't shackle me in an attempt to control my trickish wellbeing."

"How...can I trust you?"

"That isn't the question you wish to ask, is it?"

He was right. It wasn't the real question I wished for him to address. It was far deeper and more vulnerable than that.

*Will you betray me like the others?*

"I won't deny the reality that I'm a trickster with many cards up my sleeves," he sang while lowering his arms briefly as the wave's surface remained in its frozen spot like twinkling wallpaper. "But I do not betray

those I've committed my loyalty to. You included, Your Majesty."

I stared into his eyes and saw the truth in them, which left me with no choice but to ask the prime question.

"What do I need to do to forget?"

"Endure the challenge in this wave, long enough for your king to retrieve you. Do that, and I'll grant your wish."

*Grant the chance to...forget.*

"I won't remember...what I just discovered?"

"That, and anything related to him. You'll forget his existence in your life, as if your strings had never crossed or entwined. The imbecile who broke your heart the first time will be nothing but a lost memory and you'll be able to walk onto the playing field to begin your next move. Think of it like a rejected gambit, if you will. You've used some pawns on the playing field, letting them believe they've used you. Only you have the ability to accept the benefits of their sacrifices and move forward, while they'll be forced to cling to memories that have no effect on you. You'll be a winner, Your Majesty, and in return, you'll be able to delve into loving Maximus without fear. You'll be open to the world he wishes to share with you and see the downfall of those who think you lack when you're the wildcard this universe needs to win against what's coming."

*To win against what's coming...*

"Won't you tell them?"

"My lips will be sealed the moment the contract is accepted."

"By accepting, will I forget this form of you?"

"You will not," he assured me. "You will simply not recall this agreement since the deed will already be done."

"Echo?"

"Yes, Your Majesty?"

"Why help me?" I had to ask that final question because it was the last thing that was poking at my mind. He stared at me for a long moment before

he knelt down once more, so we were almost at the same eye level.

"You're meant to sit upon the throne, Your Majesty. If I can help you achieve that, my Creator will thank me one day."

It was such an honest answer that I had nothing to further debate about. He was giving me a golden chance to move forward. There was no more time to delay.

"I accept," I whispered as I looked at the flowers. "As long as I get to keep these."

He seemed slightly surprised by my added comment, but he nodded.

"All yours, Queen Alexandra Wolf."

I shivered at the usage of my name and royal title and watched as he rose once more and lifted his arms up to the skies.

"Endure what lies ahead and your king will be there to take you away from the agony."

All I could do was nod, for who knew if that king would be Maximus. Whatever challenge awaited me on the other side of the wave could be anything, but I wouldn't cower away from this.

*I will face it for the sake of a future with no more emotional boundaries.*

"Good luck, Your Majesty," he whispered.

With a loving smile, he snapped his fingers and his body disappeared into the wave, followed by mine a second later.

*The price of agony.*



"THIS...IS..."

Emerging from the wave, I was greeted with dimly lit walls that were far too familiar. Rays of moonlight seeped into the hallway, illuminating the carpet and delivering a haunting tranquility to the castle.

It was like I'd stepped back in time, and here I was on the night of my

kingdom's falling.

This was the past, I was hundred percent sure of it, and yet the scene unfolding before my eyes held an eerie mystery to it.

Clicking heels drew my attention further down the hall, and there was the blast from the past: the old me.

Looking at the image of who I once was, I had a moment of envy. Those eyes of orange were filled with happiness, and the energy dancing around my slim frame was vivid with triumph as the golden crown of emerald and pink jewels sat upon my head.

My dress gallantly flowed behind me as I walked down the halls I'd officially claimed as my own, and I held a level of innocence, sweet, pure innocence, that reflected in my face that was lit with joy. I remembered the thoughts rampaging through my head. Dreams of what could be done to aid my people. What could be changed to help our scorching future?

The hopes of working towards integrating into the world and forming alliances that would come to our defense when danger headed our way, and an expansion of our kingdom for the sake of future growth needed to happen.

Some ideas were probably impossible to implement, but that night, anything was open for possibility.

My swift steps slowed until my eyes registered the man a few steps away.

On the viewer side, I could see the moment of shock that flooded my face, contouring to alertness before a spark of shock flooded my expression. Hesitant steps brought me closer to him until we were facing each other and everything that had transpired began to unfold before me.

There was no time to prepare my poor heart for the unfolding events that I'd seen again and again in my nightmares, and surely this was the challenge set out for me, but it didn't discount the reality that it hurt.

*It hurt to witness the end of my hopes, dreams, and people all over again.*

My arms shook, just like the rest of my trembling body, as the words that triggered that suffocating whirlwind of internal catastrophe echoed through



the hall.

"I reject you."

My breath got caught in my throat as if I were the Alexandra standing before Eric in this unfolding illusion. I watched the devastation in the lines of my face as my eyes widened in understanding, and the scene followed through just like the past until the scene around us was outside and the past me sat upon the bench attempting to breathe.

I knew what would happen next, as the flickering sight of the flames teased the corner of my eyes, but instead of following my path, the scenery shifted to follow Eric's.

My eyes widened in realization, watching as he raced through the shadows. He moved swiftly as the world around us blurred until he arrived in a room of stone where another person stood.

*Another person I'd known for the last five years.*

"What took you so long?" My ears weren't deceiving me as Grayson's voice asked the primary question. "Did you kill the new queen?"

"I got her location," Eric replied. "I'm about to finish the deed, I just needed to know whether you found the crown."

Grayson tsked as he gave Eric a frustrated glare. "I haven't! I've searched everywhere. I don't know who fucking set the castle on fire, but all the defense protocols are in place. It blocked any attempt to trace the crown. I can't find it."

"It's not the crown upon her head? I can simply take it from her dead body."

"No. There are always two. One they wear during the crowning ceremony, and the one afterward. They wouldn't crown her with the real crown with the generational power. She's too weak to withstand its effects and come out to entertain her people."

His explanation was different from the way the crowning had worked. The private crowning had occurred in the morning and the second one before

our people.

*Wait...had I been wearing the crown they needed all along? Is the crown the reason why they destroyed the kingdom?*

"I need to go," Eric emphasized. "You were hired to get the crown. If you don't, you're dead."

"No," Grayson huffed in impatience as he shook his head. "If I don't get that crown, I'm fucked. I'll have to start from scratch and work my way up again. No fucking way can I lose all the years and the reputation of my father over a fucking crown. When you kill the queen, bring her body with you! My organization needs that crown."

"I love how you make it seem as if we're allies," Eric complained. "I'm doing a favor for Princess Cynthia by being here. This isn't my job."

Eric spun around with the intention of leaving, but Grayson snapped back, "You're doing this because you're fucking Alpha Maximus's mate and she's probably blackmailing you."

*What...?*

Eric came to a stop and sighed. "You treasure hunters love to snoop into strangers' businesses for no fucking reason." He looked over his shoulder, his eyes venomous in nature. "Yes. I'm fucking my Alpha's woman because she sure enjoys my cock much more than a weak boy's who's destined to be king just because of his birthright. You can say whatever you want, but it's only a matter of time before I leave that pack. I'm his Beta because my stupid father is my Alpha's best buddy on the block, and I need to be on their good side if I want to avoid being hunted by the mafia. Now, I suggest you zip your lips and blend in because if you don't find that crown, you'll have to start all over like a puppet and that would be a shame. I know you dislike being beneath any royal fucker."

Turning away, a low chuckle left his lips.

"At the end of the day, at least I know I'm a villainous motherfucker with a throne to sit upon. You're just a puppet that will be used until you lose

everything you've worked hard for."

With those words, he was out of the room and surely heading my way to finish the deed.

Grayson stood there with clenched fists. He looked to the floor like it was his worst enemy. "I'll get that fucking crown. No one else will steal it from me. Acting blind doesn't make you a fool. They'll see. They will all see. I'll bow down to no one."

I was pulled away, tears already spilling down my cheeks as I realized the ultimate truth.

*Grayson...is evil. He's after...my crown. He doesn't know. He has no fucking clue who I am and yet he used me. Manipulated me...*

He was the only one I was willing to let enter my life, the one I thought truly wanted to be my friend...lover...and maybe more. I'd give the benefit of the doubt when I saw little things, small traits here and there, and I used stress and the way others treated him as an excuse.

*The truth is...the real him is selfish, cruel, and hates royals.*

He already despised me as if I were just a sex doll - *or a Rejected Queen*. At the end of the day, I was nothing to him. The years we spent getting closer and closer were meaningless to the man who had one goal in mind.

*To be on top of anyone with a royal title. To be seen not for what he lacked, but for the power he craved. To be acknowledged and bowed down to.*

He despised anyone of royal heritage because he couldn't get the same treatment.

I registered where I was, noticing a tall man dressed in black from head to toe. A woman in white stood next to him with her arm wrapped around the man. My eyes widened when the dark figure leaned in to kiss her, his tongue moving to combat hers, the kiss rich with intense passion.

"Shadow King," the woman breathed, and his chuckle was a deep rumble as the black hollows shadowed by the hood of his cloak were surely admiring

this woman that had to be his treasure.

"In time, Cynthia. As I steal the crown of Atlas, you shall wear the Crown of Alexandra Wolf. The crown will give you the flaming power of all the souls lost tonight, as well as generations of power since the fruition of the Inferno wolves. Waves of power will be given to you, and then, we'll open the gateway to the shadow realm. That's where we'll be able to locate our swords."

"Then?" she asked with immense hope as her eyes twinkled with lust and expectations.

"Then we'll return to these very lands, you will sit upon your throne, and we'll force the world to bow to us. Only us."

She smiled seductively as she pressed her body against him.

"Excellent," she purred. "You'll get rid of the Atlas pack for me?"

"I'll wipe out their entire family line for my queen."

"Good." She beamed and leaned on her tiptoes to kiss him. "Please, Shadow King. Lead the way."

With a blink, I stood on a cliff, but it wasn't the one from the past. It was a cliff on the opposite side, overlooking the burning castle that was high in the sky.

"No."

Slowly, I turned around to see a slim man. He was young, or at least perceived himself that way. He didn't give off a powerful impression, but I'd know those snowflake eyes anywhere.

*Maximus.*

My eyes drifted over to see King Atlas as he dismounted from the horse he rode and walked over to stand next to Maximus as he tried to catch his breath.

"Dad! We have to try to find survivors!" Maximus urged and tried to push off the cliff, but his father's arms caught his shoulders and pulled him back.

"It's far too late for that, son."

"B-But...this. This is-"

"The Dark Senator's doing," King Atlas emphasized. "There is no time. We must do what I had planned."

"What are you talking about?!" Maximus huffed. "Dad, we can't just do nothing!"

"We aren't doing nothing," he urged as he turned Maximus to face him. "We will have to beat the Senator at his own game."

"What?"

"Kneel, son."

Maximus looked even more confused as he kneeled down at his father's request.

"Dad?" Maximus looked up at him as his father stared down and bobbed his head.

"What I'm about to do will surely change the world as we know it. It will awaken something that wouldn't have been done until five years from now when the Queen of the Inferno wolves would be of age. However, the Senator wishes to steal what's destined for you, and I cannot allow it."

"Dad...you're not making sense," he pleaded.

"Your mate bond with Cynthia is false."

*Maximus...was mated to Cynthia?*

Maximus's eyes were wide but King Atlas didn't delay in continuing, "It was arranged between the Inferno and Frost wolves that the destined heirs would be mated when the queen reached twenty-five. It would give her five years of ruling while you, the King of Frost, would be given ten years so that you could have a strong standing in the royal ranks and be able to protect your queen when the power dynamic is tested," he revealed. "We knew having an arranged marriage may have a negative effect, therefore, we did a ceremony with the Moon Goddess to designate you both with mates at the age of twenty."

"You...asked our Goddess to give me a different mate?" he struggled to

state the truth.

"It would give you the experience you needed in the realms of relationships before you'd be reunited with your real mate.

"Cynthia rejected me, Father! She tortured me these last five fucking years and rejected me because I'm some weak fool! Why the fuck would you allow this if you knew I'd fucking break!"

His father looked at him pityingly, but he answered, "I knew rejection was imminent, my son," he whispered, "But it did not break you."

He reached out to lift the crown upon his head, and Maximus further looked at him in confusion as his father closed his eyes.

"The true crown of the Frost Kingdom of Atlas is ready to meet its new heir. These lands of the fallen, witness the crowning of Maximus Atlas. As promised many years ago, I swore that my youngest son would not only be heir but would mate the sole heir of the Inferno Kingdom of Wolf. Destiny may have been tampered with by the bloodshed that cloaks this land, but I vow, with the Goddess of the Moon's blessings, that revenge will be delivered with my son's participation. My son will find his mate, your queen, and bring justice to all."

"What? Dad...wait...what if she's de-"

"You would have felt if she died, son," King Atlas answered. "Close your eyes."

Maximus frowned but did as asked before King Atlas lowered the crown upon his head. His whole body shivered as a hiss of pain left his lips, and I watched the second crowning process initiate, like mine.

*The memories of generations, the threads of power that run through your veins, the creation of Maeve...wait. Adamson. Does that mean...Adamson is like Maeve...and Adam is Maximus's wolf like Eve is mine?*

It was so damn confusing, but Maximus's groan caught my attention as he fell forward. His father caught him, but his eyes were forward and left me no choice but to follow to see...

"Me?" I whispered as I noticed the tiny figure standing in the burned rubble. It was easy to see what was surely the middle of the castle because it was a hill of rubble and ash. I'd never recalled this, and I wondered where Edwin was.

I did recall that he had rushed to find Rafael after sensing him, but now I couldn't figure out if it was before or within the wave.

There was no doubt that the person standing upon the rumble was me as I tugged on my hair until the braided strands were free and long. I couldn't remember the last time I had long hair, and frankly, I never really thought about why I'd only kept my hair short for the last five years. But there I was, my long strands blowing in the wind as I stood there with the crown upon my head.

Words left my lips, mimicking my copy down below, and suddenly, I understood.

"I've failed you, my wolves. My pack. I shattered my destiny as your queen...and I'm sorry. So...so sorry. This can't be over. No...it won't be over. They will feel the wrath of your cries. The fulfillment of your pain. They will be pulled into the darkness. This world will be pulled into the shadows! Let waves cruise through cities, towns, and lands! Let a world of forsaken creatures be born out of the deaths of the sacrificed! Open the gates to the world of forsaken irony and give me the privilege to avenge you. I will be the Executer! I will live for our kind to live on! I will one day sit upon the very throne that was burned today! I WILL BE YOUR INFERNO QUEEN!"

The final scream triggered all those emotions as I watched my body glow with so much power. Flames pushed outward, dancing around my body as those long locks of pink ignited into flames until the strands were short and the burned ashes of my strands levitated around me.

*Then a pillar of orange and pink light shot into the air from my being, reaching the sky and beginning to expand, outstretching from the sides.*

It went on and on until a wall of pink and orange glimmered with life, and

with a scream, two waves ignited – going in opposite directions but swallowing the world with them.

The world around me vanished the moment I was engulfed into the wave, like our surroundings, but I couldn't move as the emotions overwhelmed me, as the pain I'd felt in that moment overtook my being.

I'd forced myself to forget the truth, and here was the ultimate challenge - to endure every piece of emotion all over again.

My screams were lost in the hollowness of sadness while my hands pressed against my tear-stricken face. More tears, beads of sweat dripping down my face, screams of agony piercing the suffocating air around me, and sadness swarmed me.

So much fucking sadness...

This was the pain I'd buried within myself, along with the power I fought not to acknowledge to its fullest potential.

*I was the creator of these waves...I...was their Ruler.*

My body quaked, my mind pounded, and I bit my lip until it bled. I couldn't endure this again. I couldn't handle so much deceit.

*Eric cheated with Cynthia.*

*Grayson's intention is to kill me and steal my crown.*

*Cynthia rejected Maximus...only to use Eric while submitting to the Shadow King.*

*The Shadow King is the Dark Senator...and he wants me. No...needs me...the swords...the crowns.*

*I'm the creator of the waves.*

*The waves...that are the burning souls of my people.*



THE TRUTH WAS TOO heavy for me to carry, too exhausting to hold upon my shoulders, and all I wanted to do was submit to its energy. To fade away into the pain and sorrow and be lost in its endless well of agony after I'd failed my people.

I leaned back, my body unable to take the crippling weight of reality, but a firm surface caught me that invited a wave of frost with it.

"Alexis? Alexis?!"

Someone was calling me. Someone who still had hope in me. But I couldn't swim upward to the surface of reality. I was sinking...forgetting...hoping to never experience this pain again.

If I ever did...I'd surely perish...and what I feared the most wasn't my death.

*I feared that my salvation would ignite the death of all creation.*



## PREPARE US FOR THE BALLROOM SHOWDOWN

~M<sub>A</sub>XIMUS~

"ALEXIS? ALEXIS!?"

My arms were around her, my hands gripping her for dear life as if she'd fade entirely if I didn't hold her tight enough. The spiraling sense of doom was making it tedious to think straight, let alone attempt to figure out what was destroying Alexis from the inside out.

"Fuck," I cursed, because the weight of this unknown devastation was doing everything it could to pull me into the whirlpool of destruction, my frame wobbling.

My mind was panicking while I fought against the invisible tugging that tried to bring me under. "Shit! Maximus."

Something grabbed me - *or caught me* - but I held onto Alexis like her life really did depend on it.

Memories rushed through our connection, like an exchange from one end to another - slamming into my subconsciousness and briefly taking me away as memories rushed through me on a whim.

*Alexis running into the health building, the conversation Grayson carried on the phone, the pain, the deceit, the overwhelming emotions of broken trust,*

*Echo...*

The one thing I was worried about with Echo meeting Alexis was him giving her an offer she wouldn't refuse. I didn't fear that he'd take her life.

*I feared that he'd given her a challenge she wouldn't survive from.*

Alexandra was stronger than that, but as more memories and revelations rushed through my head, I began to fear she may end up being prey to the past she surely didn't remember.

Then I grasped the final parts of her past from the outside perspective.

*Eric rejecting Alexandra in the hall the night of her crowning, Eric meeting...Grayson? Treasure hunting, the crown, Cynthia...fucking my Beta...only to be loyal to the Shadow King...the Dark Senator. The crown opens the realms of the shadow. The swords are needed for complete ruling. The ability to create the waves is the power of the crown. My father?*

My brain slowed down on that very interaction I'd clearly forgotten.

I could barely remember the day of the first wave because I was adapting to the presence of Adamson while accepting the truth that Adam was my wolf and the power above us was the entity of the crown Father had given to me.

Father explained that, because of the wave, he'd transferred the power of the crown to me so I could begin my training as a ruler while everyone assumed he was still king.

I wouldn't sit upon the official throne until I was strong and surrounded by those who would support me when they assumed I was at my weakest.

*The rejection that made me question my worth landed me on that cliff with my father overseeing the end of yet another kingdom.*

The forgotten truth of the arranged destiny between Alexandra and me, the entwined relationships with individuals not destined for us but for the experience they would bring into our lives, not realizing the agony that would ensue nearly broke me.

*A breakup would be inevitable. The moment my path aligned with Alexis', we'd have pulled away from those mates thrown our way, but instead, they*

*rejected us. Left us feeling hollow and worthless.*

The truth was heavy, and even I struggled to carry it upon my strained shoulders.

I was so similar to Alexandra. Our paths of royal heritage had led us in different directions where we were forced to be alone and struggle to climb the steps of empowerment so we could face the world of betrayal all over again.

*Except, Alexandra's circle of support was smaller, and the truth of it all was that one of those protective points in her triangle was a traitor. One who didn't know Alexandra's true identity.*

Grayson never got the chance to see the face of Alexandra Wolf. Maybe he didn't even know the queen's name. All he needed was that crown.

*That purpose won't change if he finds out who Alexandra really is...as if he'll come near her ever again.*

My attention was drawn by the final flashback memory, and it left me internally speechless as I saw a younger version of Alexandra. Long, silky strands of pink flowed in the wind, a glimmering crown upon her head while her dress of embellished jewels of gold was stained with mud and debris.

She stood there just like we'd discovered her upon the cliff within the Void Mastery, her body shaking and projecting a level of vulnerability that made me worry that she'd buckle and fall off the very cliff itself.

*Only she was lost in the misery of the past, accepting the truth of our entwined present, and what could potentially become a rejected destiny if neither of us were strong enough to fight the hollow emptiness plagued upon us by our previous partners.*

As the final beads of tears ran down her flushed face, a declaration that shook the very land triggered a blast of flames from her body. Those long strands burned to uneven short ones, the sacrifice nothing in comparison to the bloodshed of her people, but I grasped the final seconds of power as the beam of light escaped her flesh, shooting up to the sky and spreading outward

to the sides until walls of glimmering orange and pink took a moment of glory to be seen.

*To be acknowledged as the first wave.*

Their movement confirmed it as the land shifted. The wave spread apart in opposite directions, creating waves that would go north and south.

It finally made sense. The waves were created to pull in the supernaturals worthy of entering the forbidden lands of the Void to retrieve the swords...but what was the swords' ultimate purpose?

*Alexis wasn't a rare Wave Expeditioner. She was the Creator of the Waves. The ultimate ruler...*

Reaching the finale felt like a curse, because the information was not only heavy, it fought to cripple me just like it had Alexandra. I had to hold on for the sake of both of us, my ears catching on to my brother's words.

"Can you get us out of here, Maverick?" It was Maddox who was asking urgently. "They're not going to make it if we don't get them to Roza."

"I think I can," Maverick insisted. "Fuck. This is gonna be a pain."

"Worry about that later!" Mason snapped. "We have to go now!"

"Maew."

"Echo!" the three of them exclaimed, followed by Maddox, "Help Maverick get us out of here!"

The crackling shift in the air around us made my ears pop, and suddenly my eyes were wide open as I sat up quickly.

My eyes darted around the darkroom, seeking one important being, and when they landed on that person, my heart was allowed to relax.

Alexandra was lying on the side of the bed next to me, her chest rising and falling as she was deep in sleep. I could feel the mental drain on her consciousness, but I knew without a doubt she'd recover.

My eyes scanned the room, attempting to figure out where exactly we were. There weren't many pictures in the room. In fact, there was a single one on the nightstand where Alexis stood with Edwin and Rafael behind her.

It was like they were at a festival of some sort, the three of them smiling from ear to ear as they fought to remain still for the portrait. Aside from that, everything was rather simple. As if this were a temporary place to stay.

I caught onto the mumbles outside of the door, and though my body was protesting the idea of moving, I slowly got myself up. My heart ached at leaving Alexis here, but I had to make sure the place we'd ended up was safe for us.

Reaching out for the second blanket at the end of the bed, I tugged the dark emerald and teal cover to lay upon Alexis's sleeping figure. After a soft kiss to her lips, I reached the door.

Entering the hall, I was greeted with the scents of my brothers and the very faint scent of Roza's perfume. That immediately tamed my nerves. I left the door slightly open and took the few steps down the hall to arrive in the living room that was connected to the kitchen space.

"I told you he wouldn't sleep for long," Maddox calmly stated.

"Good, cause I wanna go home. I can barely move," Maverick complained.

"Maew."

"Don't 'maew' me, Echo! Shift to your human form so we can fucking fight! And get off my head!"

"Maew."

"That's surely a no," Mason concluded and looked my way. "Max, you okay?"

"Barely," I answered. I needed to clear my parched throat.

My three older brothers frowned before Maddox got up and headed to the fridge to pull out a bottle of water. From how well it was stocked, this surely wasn't a hotel of some sort.

He reached where I stood and offered me the bottle to drink. With a brief nod of thanks, I downed the bottle in one go while acknowledging I didn't wear a shirt, just black boxers.

I didn't know what could have happened when we passed out, but my brothers always peeled any type of fabric off my body aside from my boxers to avoid the possibility of me getting too hot and being plagued with that annoyance.

"Take this creature of darkness off me!" Maverick groaned. I looked over to him, and damn, he looked rough.

"Echo." My stern voice had the black cat's head lifting from his paws before he was off Maverick's head and trying to hide behind Mason.

Maddox cracked a smirk while Mason groaned. "C'mon. Don't hide behind me. I'll die in the crossfire and frankly, I don't think my brother's mate wants us destroying her place."

"This is Alexis's place?" I inquired.

"Looks like it," Maddox replied. "Looks like one of the buildings with the protection barriers enforced against that destructive wave. The outside looks like a wasteland, but this may be a blessing on your part."

"Why?" I questioned.

"The ball was finalized an hour ago. Roza told us after she made sure you and Alexis were stable. She went back to get your outfits set. We'll have to take the underground tunnel for royals," Mason explained.

*The underground what?*

My look must have projected my confusion because Maddox added, "There are loads of special privileges for royals in this part of town. They may not know of Alexis's royal heritage, but with her as your Luna, she could be your date for the night."

"When is this?"

"Sunday, aka tomorrow evening," Maverick grumbled.

The way I just stared at them made Mason give me a sad smile.

"Sorry, bro. This week has been shit, hasn't it?"

"Five fucking days of mayhem and the only good thing out of this was meeting Alexandra," I concluded.



"Hey," Mason huffed. "You got to have two seconds of family time with us."

"That was forced," Maddox noted.

"Your curious ass would have pushed us to come back home just to see who Maximus was dating," Maverick whined. "Now punish your dumb cat."

"Echo." I used my stern voice once more, and I felt the shift in the air while Mason flinched at the arms that rested upon his head.

"You know the rules. I can't say what was requested or promised," he got straight to the point as he laid his chin on his crossed arms.

"Really? Why am I always a pedestal for you?"

"Because you let me get away with it, unlike that jerk brother of yours over there."

"Fuck you, Echo!" Maverick snapped.

"You just hate me because you can't find a girl," Echo sang back while his eyes were on me. "I didn't take into consideration that her link with you would be strong enough to deliver the truth. Intriguing."

"Truth?" Maddox questioned as he looked at me. My eyes were still on Echo. I had to ask a few things for the safety of Alexis.

"If I share the truth with my brothers, will it hurt Alexandra?"

"No," Echo hummed.

"Roza?"

"No."

"Our parents?"

"No."

"Alexis."

"Yes," he firmly replied as his eyes darkened. "Don't you think the truth has taken a big enough toll on your Queen of Flames?"

He may be right, but I disliked the mere idea of keeping things from her.

"When the Goddess of the Moon decides it's time for her to see the truth once again, it will occur. I suggest you rest and prepare for the banquet, for

all is not well and you four will be required to be present. Alexis as well."

"Why?" My eyes narrowed, knowing damn well Echo knew something. He smirked and raised his arms from Mason's head, walking over to me. He wore a suit with pink pinstripes and spun a royal cane in his grasp.

When he reached me, he stopped twirling the rod to tap it on the floor and we watched my body begin to glow as markings that replicated the incantation upon the blade of my sword appeared along my flesh.

It wasn't a big deal until I noticed the purple flow peeking out of Mason's t-shirt. "Mason?" I questioned.

He blinked to look down at his white shirt before lifting it up to see the vivid markings of purple glowing against his flesh.

"What?" he whispered in shock before lifting his gaze only to shift it to Maverick. "Black?"

My gaze turned to Maverick as he lifted his shirt to reveal the glowing black markings illuminating his flesh. We all got the same idea as we looked to Maddox to see the pure white glowing markings that overtook his arms and went down his chest to his abs.

"What does this mean?" Maddox questioned Echo. We all looked back to see his sly smile as he took off his top hat to reveal those neon pink strands of his.

"You know what it means," Echo tossed back, his eyes glimmering with excitement. "Five swords remaining, two have been found, three more to be claimed by those destined to wield them."

"That's not possible," Mason whispered. "We're all of Frost."

"And yet you each carry an element from your mother," Echo replied. "How convenient."

"Why should we attend the ball, Echo?" Maverick growled.

"The answers lie there, and who knows? Maybe you'll need a certain rank to pursue what is destined to be yours," he whispered with a wide grin. "I'm out of time."

He bowed, which triggered his shift until he was nothing but a ball of shadows floating past me down the hall. I couldn't help following until I peeked into the room to see the mischievous kitten was snuggled against Alexis's cheek as he purred away.

As much as I wanted to question him further, if I tugged him away he could potentially wake Alexis up.

**"Sneaky trickster,"** Adam calmly muttered.

*You're awake?*

**"For a while. No need for recaps."**

I sighed, feeling drained from this entire week, but we had one more challenge ahead of us.

Returning to the living room, I looked at my brothers.

"Guess we'll be resting on Monday," I whispered. "Time to tell you all of my entwined destiny with Alexandra."

*We need to prepare for the ballroom showdown.*



## FORGET THE REJECTED AND SOLEMN PROMISE

~ALEXANDRA~

"YUP. I NEED A DRINK," I concluded as I walked towards the fridge.

*The fridge of my penthouse that I haven't seen in a few weeks.*

It was a blessing Edwin had stocked it up because I wasn't expecting Max and his three brothers to be here. Scratch that, I wasn't expecting anyone to be here after the sudden wave.

How we got from the South Atlas building outskirts to my penthouse in the city was an unsolved mystery for me. I had to have been knocked out or fallen into a coma bush to wake to this fairy tale, but Max was trying to get me up to speed.

*While cranky Maverick nagged me for not remembering shit.*

"It's nine in the morning." Maverick scowled like I was a nuisance.

"Early enough to pre-drink before this apparent ball we've been cordially invited to, and since when was my name Alexis Atlas?" I questioned and looked at my chiseled chest of my mate as he followed his brother from the hallway to the kitchen island. "I don't see a ring on my finger, Alpha."

He blinked innocently while laughter came from further behind us as Mason walked into view with Maddox in tow. The three of them wore proper

black attire with cloth masks in their grasp.

"She's got a point, Maximus. You owe your Luna a ring if you're going to introduce her to the world," Mason noted.

"Could just make it a secret surprise and then throw a proper celebration when you're finally mated," Maddox suggested.

"Parties suck! We ain't throwing one," Maverick concluded.

"You're late, brother." Mason chuckled and placed his hands behind his back. "Mom already started planning."

"What?!" Maverick and Maximus declared, looking at Mason while he casually shrugged.

"Yup. She told me and Maddox that we better hurry up whatever shit we're wasting time on so she can send formal invitations to the various packs. I think she's gonna make it a big one."

"Dad gave her a big budget to blow," Maddox added with his usual blank expression.

"UGH!" Maximus and Maverick groaned.

"Please tell me this will be planned like...somewhere next week, or maybe the following week, or a damn month from now," I pleaded. "We deserve one rest day a week and Saturday didn't count because it came and left, and I still feel weak as fuck."

"Let's take a week off," Mason suggested. "I don't know how you guys are still functioning."

"It's not like they have much of a choice there, Mason," Maddox noted.

"We should get going," Maverick urged in seriousness. "If we want the element of surprise with our arrival, best we do things now to avoid conflict."

Maddox and Mason nodded before they walked over to surprisingly give me a hug each.

"We didn't really get much bonding time, Alexis, but welcome to the family!" Mason cheered.

"You literally make it sound like they're married." Maddox sighed, but

hugged me and patted my back. "Take it easy. Roza's gonna bring you guys outfits an hour before the event. Then we'll have access to the private tunnel and entrance to the ball."

"Alright," I replied as they headed for the door.

Maverick muttered something like "Why y'all always make me go last" before walking over to me so we faced each other.

Opening his arms up just slightly, he muttered, "Hug and go."

His effort actually made me smirk as I gave him a five-second hug. Then he was at the door and following his brothers as they waved goodbye.

We waited for the door to close and lock before Maximus decided to ask the prime question of the morning.

"How are you feeling?"

I looked at him for a long minute before turning around to grab two glasses from the cupboard. "Well, after surviving a wave that clearly knocked me out and could have landed me on death row, I can't complain, right?" I tossed out.

Walking over to the island, I laid the two glasses down, my eyes locking onto the vase full of neon pink flowers. "Wow. These are so pretty," I praised as I reached out to touch the delicate petals with a hint of black glitter on them. "They remind me of Echo."

"Maew." The black cat with pink eyes was on the island at the mention of his name, waltzing over until he was brushing his body against my hand, purring the entire time.

"Hey, Echo. Did you lead Maximus and his brothers to me? I bet you did. You should be a mischievous treasure hunter," I praised while petting him. "Come with me into waves and find treasure."

"He'd lead you into a pit if he's in a bad mood," Max stated with a sour expression, eyeing his black kitten carefully.

I paused in my petting moment to retrieve the bottles of wine from the fridge. "Red or white?" I asked as I turned around to show him the options.

He was more focused on my body as he looked at me from head to toe as I stood there in an oversized black t-shirt.

*His oversized black t-shirt that just covered my butt.*

It may not have been the most appropriate attire to wear when his brothers were around, but I literally had no clean clothes in my closet since our last wave before the fiasco of this week, and I tried not to have a massive wardrobe in this penthouse.

*Or any spot I stayed at in general.*

I was sure Edwin had some clothes hidden somewhere, but I really wasn't going to try searching for them now. Maximus did say he and Rafael had come by to make sure I was alive so they wouldn't need to go on a killing spree, but with this sudden banquet happening this evening, neither of them were taking chances with us not being prepared.

When moving in the realm within the waves, nothing was in your control, but here in the surface world, we could bend things to our benefit, and this was going to be one of those times.

With Roza getting my outfit sorted with Max's, all I had to worry about was resting my body. That wouldn't be too hard with some wine in my system. The alcohol would give me a buzz loud enough to calm the filtering worries trying to claw their way into my mind.

The haze upon my mind was pretty heavy, even with hours upon hours of sleep, and I was sure it would take me a few days to get over it.

*If we didn't enjoy another week of chaotic mayhem.*

"White if we're wasting time talking. Red if we're doing other things."

He couldn't stop himself from smirking, which led to me putting the white wine back and placing the bottle of red wine on the counter to find the opener.

"Are you sure you're good, Alexandra?" Max asked again as I scurried through the first drawer of knickknacks.

"Yes, my King of Frost. I'm perfectly fine. Why you keep asking?"



"I wanted to ask you what you want to do with Grayson," he questioned.

"Who's that?" I replied and sighed. "I swear I put this wine opener somewhere." Closing the drawer, I moved on to the next.

"Grayson, Alexis," he repeated, and I paused to look over my shoulder at him.

"Who is he?" I inquired with a dubious look. "Is he a crew member of yours? Or one of the knights?"

The way Maximus looked at me with an arched eyebrow had me pausing in my search to find the corkscrew so I could give him my full attention.

"What?"

"You don't remember Grayson?"

"Is...he important?" I questioned with a pout as I watched Max approach me. When he reached me, he leaned down to lightly kiss me - something we hadn't done because when I'd woken up, he was in the middle of a conversation with his brothers.

Releasing my lips, he reached past me for the bottle of wine and walked over to the island while pulling the cork out like it was nothing.

"Show off," I muttered under my breath, feeling his slight amusement as he poured us full glasses. I wasn't going to ignore the slight shrivel of worry I sensed through our connection.

"Why though? Who's this Grayson dude?" I inquired as I walked over to his side. He looked down at me once more, observing my expression as if he were trying to see the very depths of my soul.

It was slightly uncomfortable, but I didn't move my gaze away, hoping he'd see that I really knew nothing about this stranger.

"What about Eric?" he inquired.

"Eric, your ex-Beta who betrayed you after basically attempting to attack me on the boat when we were in the Void Mastery?"

"What about before?"

"Before?" I tilted my head to the side. "Am I supposed to know him from

before? Our first meeting was when he arrived at the master cabin to report the commotion."

"Nothing before that?"

"Nope," I replied and pouted my lips. "Am I supposed to know this Eric dude, too? Eve is sleeping or I would ask her."

"No," he finally replied as he moved to slip an arm around my waist to keep me close. "It's fine. They're unimportant."

"With you asking about them, they seem important for something," I voiced with slight suspicion. His answer was in a kiss. He looked into my eyes once more as he pulled away and moved to grab our glasses.

Offering me the wine, we quietly clinked out glasses before I backed up to lean against the counter while he rested against the island. We sipped our wines in silence, my eyes drifting to Echo from time to time as he observed us with interest.

I wasn't sure if this was an awkward silence. I wanted to know who this Grayson person was, but a part of me disliked the name in general. Like he was some sinister man or villain that deserved to enjoy my flames burning his flesh.

Truthfully, I was afraid of digging any deeper in my mind, frightened I'd find something that wasn't so pleasant after that wave. Never had I passed out from the mere entrance of a wave. Something had to have happened and yet I felt like a coward now since I wanted to ignore what my brain wished for me to remember.

I could hear the echo whispering in our connection which told me Max was probably speaking to one of his Betas. Thinking about this week and all the new individuals I'd gotten to meet left me wondering when I'd get to enjoy a day in the pack life.

With the encounter of the enemy wolves before the wave, I never got to see or interact with the kids. It left me feeling a bit down as I stared at the small amount of red beverage in my glass.

I swirled it around with the slight tilt of my hand, and unexpectedly a memory hit me.

*"WOULD YOU EVER BETRAY ME?"*

*My calm eyes looked over to the beautiful culprit of the question. Her long dress of ice blue was flowing in the wind that danced against our flesh and cooled down our hot bodies after the enchanting dance we'd enjoyed.*

*"Never, my queen," I responded without much thought, grabbing her interest as she turned her head to look directly into my eyes.*

*Ice blue eyes narrowed accusingly at me, while her body moved from the balcony ledge to stand before me.*

*"How do I know for sure?" she asked. "Everyone always says they're loyal to you, and then they fuck it all up. When money, power, or fame is offered, they forget all about the promises they made, and in return, they accept what can't be broken. They're forced to forget their commitment for the sake of claiming pennies and a reputation they believe will save them from my wrath. What makes you think you're any different from them? Why should I trust your words?"*

*My lips spread into a loving smile as I lowered the drink onto the ledge to ensure my hands were free. She stared at me in interest as my hands cradled her delicate cheeks and slowly, my thumb glided along her bottom lip that was slightly parted.*

*"My loyalty is imprinted on these very lips," I whispered. "Just like yours has made its way to my heart. Every kiss upon my flesh, every bite, and mark laid with your mouth reminds me that I'll always be yours. That no money, power, or opportunity of fame can pull me away from the intense feeling of gratification and lust you deliver with just a simple touch of your body."*

*Her cheeks began to flood with red as she had no choice but to continue staring up at me.*

*"W-What if I can't touch you?" she huffed in defiance.*

*Her cute display left me chuckling as I leaned further in to press my forehead against hers.*

*"I can feel you, my queen. Feel your desire, uncertainty, fear, and immense love for me. You know within your heart I'd never betray you."*

*"What if you reject me?" she quietly questioned. I pulled back enough to see her worried eyes. "You've heard the rumors. Kings are rejecting their queens so they can move onward while the women are left in shambles. I won't endure that."*

*"You'll never have to," I insisted before capturing her lips. She tried to pull away, but my hands left her cheeks to pull her body against mine before pinning her against the ledge. I didn't give her any mercy as I kissed her like our lives depend on it until we had no choice but to break the intense connection to breathe.*

*"I vow in this lifetime and the next that I'll never reject you," I vowed and took a step back to go on one knee. With a lift of her hand, my rough lips pressed against the back of it.*

***"My loyalty is only to you."***

**"ALEXIS."**

I blinked away the flashback, noticing I no longer held the glass of wine in my grasp. Instead, my hand was resting in Max's, palm facing up. I took in the lines of my palm, while my mind took this moment to acknowledge how similar our lives were.

*How entwined the lines of our destiny are in this life, just like in our past.*

Neither of us had really confronted that aspect. Maybe Max was slightly worried about digging up a past that may have not been in our favor.

*Just like I feared doing.*

"Alexandra." Max's voice was so soft, as if he worried speaking any

louder would frighten me. If only he could see what was running through my mind, specks of memories I couldn't stop from tumbling into my subconscious.

The best way to describe it was like viewing an album for the first time, only the images projected scenarios you couldn't recall, but your gut told you that they had happened.

*Images that carried the truth of what I could do, and confrontations with individuals with black masks that covered their faces. Revelations that didn't just hurt me, but my mate standing before me. Information that would change how we tackled our future.*

"Who's Cynthia?" The question left my lips before I could stop it, and I didn't dare lift my head up, as if afraid his response would ruin me.

*Shatter my life like fragile glass.*

I expected an excuse of some kind because that was what guilty people did when caught with another, but he replied as if I weren't accusing him of being with someone else.

"My ex-mate," he announced. "She rejected me five years ago."

*Reject...didn't someone reject me...no...I haven't been with anyone...have I?*

The mere idea of being with anyone other than Max hurt my head. More so, I felt like I'd never committed to another in a serious relationship. Flings, one-night stands, those never compared to what I'd experienced with Max.

No one brought the level of safety he delivered just with his presence or made me feel like I could share every part of me from the past to the present and not be judged negatively. He cared for me. Was fond of me. He cared not about the length of my hair or the clothes I wore upon my flesh, and he didn't hold distaste for my characteristics.

"Why did she...reject you?" I asked, struggling to say the last two words. My head pounded like crazy, but I ignored the drumming pain to focus on Maximus's response.

"I was weak."

The response encouraged me to lift my head up and see the hurt in his expression as he smiled slightly. With no sunlight thanks to the cloudy, thick sky that was still harboring bits of smoke from this week's chaos, his face was illuminated by the under-the-cupboard lights that shone from behind me.

They made the shadows dance upon his face, only accenting the emotions that came to the surface with our heavy conversation.

"You're not weak." I couldn't help but state the honest truth as I stared into his eyes.

He smiled as his fingers wrapped around my hand, holding it tightly while he reached out to lightly brush away a few strands of my short locks.

"Back then I was," he whispered as his expression got sadder as the seconds went by. "Growing up around my brothers and sister, I always felt frail in comparison. I was the youngest, and in my mind, I hoped the responsibility of leadership wouldn't fall upon my shoulders."

His hand glided through my hair and his fingers brushed the side of my neck, moving to my shoulder.

"It wasn't until I was sixteen that it finally clicked in that I was the North born. That I was destined to take the throne from my father and not my brothers or even my sister, who was the firstborn. The sudden realization that I'd have to sit upon the throne simply frightened me. It scared me to the core, and though I had no choice but to participate in the training and learn the wisdom needed to rule, I wouldn't take it seriously. I acted like a typical youngest child would, and I got away with it because my parents knew the burden that would be bestowed upon me when the time came to wear my father's crown," he explained and closed his eyes. "My brothers never treated me poorly or out of spite. They encouraged my dismissive behavior, like my parents, because they knew the moment I was pulled into the realms of royal politics, my innocent childhood would end. I wouldn't be just anyone anymore. I'd be somebody with a title simply because of my birthright, and

those individuals never get the respect they deserve."

"Because people think they didn't earn it," I whispered.

"Exactly," he replied and opened his eyes to stare into mine. "My sister was a little stricter on me. Probably because she could see my future. See the layers of betrayal that would hit me harder than I expected. Cynthia was forced into my life when I was twenty. My parents were trying to make an arranged marriage of sorts, and well, Cynthia walked into the common room and boom. The mate bond triggered...only it didn't feel the way ours does."

"It didn't?"

"Nah," he said with a hint of amusement as he shook his head. "I felt her immediate disappointment. Her family was so excited, but Cynthia looked absolutely miserable. To her, I was too scrawny and didn't carry any attractive points since I wasn't covered in tattoos and didn't give off an Alpha vibe. Cynthia is a submissive wolf, but her human ego plays an Alpha role. She projects to the world that she's invincible, but she craves being with someone who would make others bow without the obvious crown upon their heads. She wants those who look her way to fear her because of the consequences they would receive if they didn't give her immense respect and utmost loyalty. She wants a bad boy. A merciless Alpha who doesn't show kindness to their pack members. I guess that's the pack she grew up in, with an Alpha who abused his women unless they had some sort of royal title and empowered the men to be controlling savages who held no respect for women. To her, I was completely useless, even with my royal title."

"Maximus," I whispered and leaned into him, my hands laid upon his chest. His sad smile was back as he sighed.

"From twenty to just before my twenty-fifth birthday, I remained in our odd relationship, but in secret. She was embarrassed by me. Didn't want to be near me when we had public gatherings. Balls like the one we're attending happened less frequently back then, but she ensured she'd go alone or with a man of her choosing while I was alone. Many assumed I kept my mate

hidden to protect her, but it was simply because Cynthia was embarrassed by me. She'd abuse me when I didn't meet her standards, insult me with degrading titles and words to further ruin my ego. I think she'd overheard my parents talking about the chance of me being the reincarnation of a royal from the past, and she used that to mock me. She'd say that if we were destined to be together, it surely was a mistake the first time. That our Goddess had to retry because it was a disgrace to her holy name."

I was literally speechless as I stared at him in pure shock. Never in my life had I seen a woman abuse a man, and maybe because of that lack of knowledge, I automatically assumed it didn't happen.

*Yet someone like Maximus was abused by a woman just because they were mated.*

"Crowning normally happens at twenty, but I delayed mine on purpose. I didn't want to be in power when I had no confidence in myself. How would I lead an empire like the Atlas Pack, especially as the North part, when I had no backbone? We'd be mocked and frankly, no one in our pack deserved that. Beta Simon and Beta Yuki endured a lot of backlash simply because they were loyal to a weak fool like me. I couldn't hold myself accountable for the rest of my pack members dealing with similar bullying tactics. It was a good thing, honestly. I guess I knew Cynthia would get tired of me...and well, she rejected me."

"So...she..." I tried to think of how it could have gone down after wasting five years of his life to dump him like a piece of trash.

"She waited until the night of the ball and rejected me a few minutes before I was supposed to be offered a position that is ranked similar to a president of a country or a CEO of a huge company," he confessed and chuckled. "I couldn't accept it. I was too broken...too defeated to claim a position I knew I could never fulfill with my broken self-confidence. I felt absolutely worthless, but the following night was when we got word of another attack on a kingdom. We were too late. That was the night of the



wave...and I honestly didn't remember much until this wave triggered those buried memories."

"This wave...triggered certain memories in me...but..." I struggled to explain. "Some individuals covered in black, like their faces were covered with a solid black line. If you want my honest opinion, I don't feel the need to know who they were in my life."

It was the truth. I took a deep breath and let it out. Gliding my hands upward until my arms wrapped around his neck, I pulled him in for a tight hug, one that made me wish I never had to let him go.

*A hug that would attempt to prove to him how vitally important he was to this world.*

"I'm sorry you dealt with that, Maximus. I'm truly sorry you couldn't meet someone who would accept you for who you were back then."

He hugged me back as his body relaxed in my comforting hold, his lips lightly brushing the back of my shoulder before he laid a tender kiss to my flesh.

"It's funny because that's all I ever wanted back then. To be accepted not because of the crown upon my head, the title I carried because of my surname, or the privileges given to be by default. I wanted to be accepted because I earned it. I felt that I deserved to be respected because I worked hard for the world to see my worth. In the end, it's because of rejection that I gave up fearing power and decided that I'd surpass what was always expected of me," he explained and held me a little tighter. "My brothers helped me physically get stronger while my sister guided me to enhance my magic. With the introduction of the waves, I took advantage by making that world my training ground. I worked towards becoming someone so strong that the very demons trembled at the foreign drop in my temperature. I worked and worked, and after claiming my sword, I simply got stronger."

I released him so he could lean back to look at me once more, pride flickering in his eyes as he smiled genuinely with a spark of hope.

"I may have been rejected because of my fragility, but I realized that being fragile doesn't mean you're worthless," he emphasized. "Ice is probably the most fragile element out there because it can shatter with enough force or melt due to intense heat. No one thinks about the shards that remain from being broken that can be a form of weapon, just like the pools of water that hide doses of poison or drown an individual with ease. I finally allowed myself to realize that fragility didn't mean worthlessness. It was simply something I could embrace and show to those who I truly love, and hide within the layers of superiority to the world that loves to judge and mock me."

"I'm glad you didn't think you had to become like those men Cynthia lusted over," I quietly admitted.

"One thing my father taught me was that a king will never hurt his queen. No hand should hit her flesh out of anger and no words should be said to break her. If a king can't cherish his queen, how can he carry gratitude for the loyal members of his kingdom? How can an Alpha acknowledge those who remain in his pack if he can't acknowledge the loyalty of his Luna after belittling her worth? Alphas believe they can prosper to their highest capabilities without a Luna, but it's only when they experience what it's like to have a woman by their side who supports their endeavors that they realize how much stronger, wiser, and more victorious they could be with her assistance. That's exactly why throne rooms are supposed to have two chairs, not one."

"Do you believe you're soft for showing affection to me?"

"Never," he replied immediately. "If I want to kiss you for the entire world to see, I'll do it in a heartbeat, Alexandra. I'll hold your hand in public, caress your cheek in the midst of a crowd. I'll show my affection by being present by your side, and defend you if anyone tries to fuck with you. Being protective of what I cherish isn't a sign of weakness to me. It proves you're more than just a trophy that sits on display for guests to see. You're like

glistening jewelry that is valued by all those who get a glimpse, and nothing will change that."

"Even..." I trailed off as I struggled to ask the ultimate question shimmering in my mind as the last image within that album of memories revealed the very last page. Lowering my head, I whispered, "even if I may...be the one who started the waves?"

I braced for his rejection, fearing that I'd be alone in trying to figure out the ultimate truth that was kindled by the last wave. That was the only part I could recall clearly now, as the rest seemed to fade away now that the topic of this woman named Cynthia was dealt with.

"Nothing will change that," he repeated again and forced me to look up with his hand beneath my chin. "I know, Alexandra."

My eyes widened while his orbs swarmed with understanding. "I saw what you saw before the first wave was triggered. I know you're the creator of the waves."

"Aren't you...frightened?"

"Am I supposed to be?" he countered. "Are you gonna throw a wave at me?"

That made me scrunch my face in slight amusement. "No."

"Then there's nothing else to worry about."

"I could be a monster," I tossed back in an effort to change his mind.

"Then I guess I've fallen in love with a pretty one," he concluded with a loving smirk as he pressed me against the counter once more, his lips just inches from mine while his groin pressed against me. "Stop trying to push me away, Alexis."

I pouted slightly as I finally let my fears come out in words.

"Would...would you ever reject me?" My voice actually trembled with the question. "Dislike me...because I'm not a submissive woman? Be disgusted by the way I dress...or hate that I'm willing to be confident with or without you by my side."

I paused as the remaining words flowed into my mind even though I couldn't remember their original context. "Do you see me as more than just...a sex toy?"

He stared down at me as it was his turn to be speechless.

Then there was a flash of possessive anger as he growled, "Who has ever said that to you?"

"I can't...remember?" I really wasn't sure. "It's just...those were the words that came to my mind and I couldn't really stop myself from asking. I've never been in a serious relationship where a man even cared about my wants or dislikes...but if...if I'm going to give you all of me, I need the answers to those questions."

Forcing myself to look confidently back at him, I quietly declared, "If I'm going to let my heart love you wholeheartedly, I need to know the answers, Maximus."

That's what I truly wanted.

To stop fearing love. To stop walking backward and to move forward. To finally allow myself to be free to enjoy this - all of these new experiences and firsts in a relationship that was destined for me.

"I just...want to love you with my full heart. To be free of any worries so I can cherish the path ahead for us...good or bad. I know we've imprinted on one another, and that should be enough...but maybe I'm being a bit greedy wanting mor-"

I didn't finish because Maximus's movement made the words fade from my throat as he moved back to kneel upon one knee. My widened eyes stared down at his in shock, noticing the complete calm in his expression as he took my left hand and pulled it closer to his lips until they pressed upon the base of my ring finger.

My body shivered at the piercing flow of magic that began to pulse into the air while my eyes trailed onto the frosty sensation moving along my ring finger that he continued to kiss.

When his lips left the sensitive spot, my jaw went slack as my eyes watered when I saw the glowing ring of light blue that bled to the surface of my flesh. It pulsed with his energy, even though it was embedded into my skin, making my insides tingle with lust and happiness with the realization of what he'd done.

"In the Atlas culture, when a man has every intention of marrying their Luna, they embed their ring finger on their right hand with a ring of magic," he revealed, unlocking the knowledge from long ago that I'd surely forgotten. "I placed it on your left because I don't just have the intention of marrying you, Alexandra. I'm vowing that I will marry you. That you will be my Luna and my queen that will stand right next to me with equal power. I will never dismiss your knowledge or actions taken to protect yourself, me, or anyone you cherish, and I will never reject you."

Tears fled my lids before I could stop them, and he held my hand firmly as he continued.

"I'm not perfect. I have skeletons in my closet that I'm not ready to face. I may be a good guy in this power dynamic against the Dark Senator, but I'm not clean. I've done things to get stronger, and I have enemies waiting for my downfall because of it."

He paused to assess my reaction, but I stood there without a flicker of fear. I never wanted a perfect man. I wanted someone who can walk boldly on their path without being babied into doing it. I wanted someone who was willing to push through the realms of maturity and be a man, even if he needed extra support.

Support was different than dragging someone's hand into realms they were frightened to endure. I wanted to be that hand of support that held his when he wished to go through those unexplored worlds with a partner by his side and not alone.

*There's a difference between not wanting to move forward and fearing to move forward without a hand to hold.*

"What I can promise is that I've come to accept that I love every part of you. Your dominance and ability to hold your own without diminishing other's shining light makes my heart skip with pride. The way you dress proves you're confident in your skin and your fashion tastes. Your strength isn't just because of your hidden royalty, but because of the power you've worked hard to obtain by yourself. And I admire that you don't hesitate to protect the innocent and those whom others would consider unworthy of a hassle."

He moved my hand just to brush his lips along the tingling mark that left me shivering while my body went aflame within. His eyes darkened with authority as he needed to emphasize one final point.

***"Let it be known that you will never in this lifetime or the next be just a sex toy to me."*** He used every bit of his Alpha power to make those words thrum through the air as if the Goddess of our Moon were listening to his very words. ***"I do not fuck you for fun. I make love to you because I'm privileged to love a woman like you who's a temple of bliss. I will never force myself on you, nor will I ever take advantage of our connection."***

His other hand covered my hand as he looked me dead in the eye.

"My love for you, Alexandra Wolf, is absolute, and it doesn't matter how many days, months, or years it will take to prove it to you. I will commit and wait until I've proven to you my intentions are real."

I swallowed the lump in my throat as more tears flooded my eyes and down my cheeks.

"Will you give me a chance, Queen of Flames?"

I nodded quickly as I muffled a sob and used my free hand to wipe my eyes. He let his face be flooded with happiness as he rose back up only to cup my cheeks and kiss me fiercely.

There was nothing holding me back - nothing stopping me from riding out the full ripple of undeniable lust that surged through my body.

One thing led to another. His shirt slipped off my bare body, followed by

my cheeky panties, while his boxers were gone, leaving us naked in my kitchen.

He groaned against my lips as if he couldn't get enough of my taste, his hand gripping my ass before lifting me right up. My legs wrapped around him to ensure we'd never drift apart, my heatwaves clashing with his blizzard gusts.

He carried me with ease, our tongues entwined as we kissed and kissed. My mind felt like it was falling within this hot sensation - a swirling masterpiece being created from our intense hunger for one another.

When I felt the soft fabric of the bed, it only encouraged my body to grow hotter in preparation for what was to come.

Max pulled back to take me in from head to toe, smelling the air that was dosed heavily with our burning arousal for one another.

"Today I'll show you how a man should worship such a sacred temple," he vowed with those intense orbs that could swallow someone with his piercing gaze alone. He leaned in close on purpose as he whispered into my ear, "You're my well, Alexandra, and your king is thirsty for you."

*Oh my Goddess...*

His husky words lit me up like a firecracker; the desperation in his tone only further emphasized just how much he wanted to dive into me.

*To show me exactly what he meant.*

The slow movements of his actions that followed delivered waves of cool breeze along my flesh as he layered my skin with kiss after kiss. I'd never felt so embodied with my femininity until I met Maximus.

Such simple actions did far more to empower me than I was sure he realized as he continued to leave pecks and sucked my flesh in every section of my front side. My neck, arms, chest, breasts, stomach, legs, the top part of my feet. And then he flipped me over to enjoy going all along my backside.

He purposely left hickeys where they would be seen, so the world of royal wolves could see them tonight at the banquet, and I wasn't the slightest

bit ashamed. I encouraged it with my moans for more, begging for him to continue on and on.

I was dripping wet when he flipped me back, licking his swollen lips as he once again admired every inch of me as I breathed heavily. Did he realize how fucking hot he looked right now? The way the shadows cascaded upon his chiseled flesh. Did he realize how irresistible he was? Just keeping still beneath him was becoming a harder task as I wanted to ride this man like a fucking pony and let him fill me up with his cum again and again.

The way his swollen lips quirked only reminded me once again that he knew exactly what I'd just envisioned, and from the glimmer in his eyes, he approved of it wholeheartedly.

"We have all day, Alexandra," he reminded me. "The ball is at seven."

He delivered a searing kiss while his two fingers teased my folds. I moaned heavily into his mouth as I arched my back and lifted my hips, enjoying the sound of his fingers gathering my juices.

"Keep moaning like that," he urged me as he tugged on my bottom lip and began to move down my body with a trail of kisses. He sucked on my nipples while continuing to stimulate me down under, my moans motivating him to continue.

His tongue left no mercy to my hard buds, teasing them at his own leisurely pace, knowing how the ache between my legs grew stronger and stronger with his continuous taunts.

"Maximus," I moaned in need.

"Do you know how mesmerizing it is to watch you writhe beneath me?" he pondered, rewarding me with two ice-cold fingers. My breath hitched and I let out a drawled moan, the quivering hot walls of my pussy clenching against his fingers like it was his cock.

"I excite you with just my fingers. That makes me yearn for you more. Knowing I have such a strong effect over you."

His fingers gave me a few deep thrusts, scissoring and swirling within me



before pulling out entirely. He didn't give me time to complain, his mouth taking their place and sending me on an ecstatic wonderland of tongue thrusts and flicks of my clit.

He knew exactly how to eat a woman up, alternating in a rhythm that was completely unpredictable. It was driving me insane, making it hard to keep still when he was doing such a fantastic job.

"Ah...yes. There...oh Goddess, fuck." My pants were quick and heavy, my body tingling in anticipation of my orgasm that was building with each thrust, lick, suck, and flick. "Alpha!"

The burning passion this time around was indescribable. It spread throughout my body, further heightening my senses and this wondrous experience.

I wanted to cum so badly, and I couldn't stand going at his pace anymore as I balanced myself with one hand while reaching down to claim those silky strands of his in my captivity and press him further between my legs.

I swore he chuckled at my hasty tactic but fuck, this man did not disappoint as he changed his rhythm and moved deeply and swiftly into me, which sent me into the realms of blissfulness.

He took in my release like the flow of my juices was the sacred Nile, lapping me up as I shuddered from every movement. I let go of him as I caught my breath, my shoulders moving up and down while my half-opened eyes locked onto his dancing ones that took in my lustful gaze.

I could see the predator in his intense gaze as he slowly enjoying licking me up once more while maintaining eye contact. It was sensually hypnotic and pulled me into his web until he finished and moved in a swift movement to lock my lips with his.

The lingering taste of my creamy release mixed with the bitter taste of the wine, the combination rather addicting, which prompted my dominating kiss. I tried to control myself and let him lead, but little things like this did crazy things to me, and I almost wondered if it had to be due to the remnants of the

past where I was the opposite sex.

I expected Maximus to be bothered by it, but he let me have my controlling moment before pressing me into the sheets and devouring my mouth like it was irresistible.

He was between my legs before I knew it, and I couldn't be happier as he rubbed his rod against my wet entrance. He inched into me nice and slow, the slowness clearly on purpose to torture me just a little.

It made me smirk devilishly at him, and I waited until he was nice and deep to clamp around him. He groaned at my cruel move as I pressed a firm kiss against his lips.

"Sorry," I quietly whispered against his lips. "I sometimes have a tendency to try to take control."

He paused to look into my eyes before tugging at my bottom lip.

"Don't apologize," he urged, making sure I caught onto his slight seriousness. "I like it. I love you just the way you are."

His reminder was sealed with a kiss, and then we were moving.

His throbbing member filled me up as it hit the perfect spot, again and again, like a game of darts. His hips moved to this feverish tune, his thick cock sliding out to the tip and slamming in once more.

My body was on fire, and even the icy feel of his body couldn't tame this overwhelming heat. It felt so good, his emotions transparent and pure, that I could feel deep within his heart that he truly loved me.

*He cherished our eventful meeting like it was a golden opportunity, cradled our relationship like a sacred heirloom, felt gratitude for finding someone honest and emotionally connected to him, and bubbled with excitement at the idea of a future together.*

Never in my entire life had I felt this from a lover, and I felt so blessed in return.

*To be acknowledged, loved, and cherished by another.*

My climax was approaching, from the tingling in my toes to the

swarming passion that was spreading through my body.

"Maximus. Maximus. Maximus!" Closer and closer with each throbbing thrust. I couldn't help but reach for his shoulders, gripping them for a moment before I craved to further glide my hands along his back and cling on tightly.

He moaned at the touch of my fingertips, and that somehow gave him some rejuvenated energy as he managed to rest back on his knees and pull me right against his muscled frame. My body was forced to remain still as he doubled his speed, slamming into me.

I couldn't do anything but moan and beg for him to move even faster, my breathy cries nearly untranslatable as my body began to grow tense and my eyes rolled back. All I could do was brace for the exotic undoing of the braid of pleasure that built within my core. Only a few more pumps until I'd reach the ultimate climax.

"Let me hear you. Cum for me, Alexandra!" he ordered, and I didn't have the slightest chance of disobeying as I was pulled into oblivion.

"MAXIMUS!"

I was lost in the currents of pleasure as wave after wave submerged me in withering ecstasy, but I still clung to Max as he continued pounding into me. The pleasure was unmeasurable as my silent cries turned to whimpers and my nails dug into his flesh. I pressed myself even closer to him, resting my head into the nook of his shoulder while my hands of scorching heat laid firmly on his back.

He moaned louder and louder, stating my name again and again - *Alexandra, Alexandra* - a repetitive hymn that he sang in hopes that reaching the final note would lead to a blissful finish.

My body was on fire, the overstimulation of his thrusts combining into the sudden build of yet another climax waiting for the chance to ruin me. I tried to slow it down - to tame the spike of prickling wanderlust that soared through my senses.

"Fuck! Just...a little more-" he grunted through clenched teeth as his grip

tightened further. I was going to cum again, it was inevitable as the prickling pleasure began to run down my flesh, igniting goosebumps as my world spun.

"Alpha, please," I begged because I knew I couldn't stand this pace any longer if I came again. "Cum, my king!"

I wasn't thinking when the words left me, but it was exactly what he needed to be nudged over the edge as he pushed my body downward so I took every bit of his cock in one final blow.

"ALEXANDRA!"

We were lost in our combined ecstasy, the sensations far stronger than I'd ever experienced as our connection molded us into one.

We collapsed into the sheets, our bodies cloaked in sweat. I couldn't think, could barely breathe, and my consciousness was going in and out as my body continued to quiver from the running high.

I wanted to remain conscious for what surely would lead to another round, but I was already fading with the tempting desire to enjoy a brief nap.

Lips lightly claimed mine, followed with a soft press against my sternum, heating up my imprint and sending little shocks of pleasure through me.

All I could conjure was a weak moan, my consciousness further dipping into the welcoming shadows of tranquility. I didn't fear them, nor was I frightened of the idea of sleeping.

I was in safe hands after all, and I knew without a doubt that Maximus would take care of me.

"Sleep, my queen. We'll enjoy plenty more of these moments in the near future."

*That was a solemn promise.*



## HAPPIER AND RING OF PROTECTORS

"Fucking hell, Edwin! Are you trying to kill me?! Oh god, I can barely breathe. I knew I shouldn't have eaten that extra chocolate croissant...but it was so good, dammit. I swear this dress was made in the 1800s cause who the fuck still wears corsets unless they're about to be fucked silly in the ass?"

"Keep your sexual fantasies to yourself," he huffed and gave the teal ribbon strings one final pull, cinching me up to the max.

"I'm gonna die," I practically sobbed.

"You're going to break her ribs, Edwin," Rafael concluded, looking completely sorry for me as he stood in the corner of the room so he wouldn't be even close to Edwin's wrath.

*His sinister Dark Fae, short-tempered wolf wrath that was surely going to murder me before I arrived at this damn ball.*

"Good. Maybe she'll think twice next time she's gonna pass out during a wave."

"Oh c'mon! Have mercy on me. I don't even know what knocked me out. Shouldn't you be grateful I'm alive, even if there's a chance of amnesia?" I suggested, hoping it would give me a hint of pity from my overprotective first-in-command. "Besides, Maximus found my unconscious ass with his brothers before I could be eaten. We have a happy ending."

"If I didn't leave your side to begin with, it would have never happened,"

he voiced, and I swore he was itching to tug on the ribbons of my corset dress.

"You gave me space while you ensured those children didn't perish from those enemy wolves," I pointed out the obvious. "You could have taken advantage of your vacation time to go on a date with Rafael, but n- AH!"

"You're seriously going to steal every bit of breath from her, Edwin," Raf stated out of pity. "Let's not encourage Alpha Maximus to come back here at the feel of his suffocating mate, shall we?"

"Hmph," Edwin replied as he clearly tied the knot of the bow while I tried to get enough air into my burning lungs.

**"And we're going to die,"** Eve concluded, sharing my pain.

*If we do, know I actually love when you nag me.*

**"That's nice to know."**

**"What is this about you dying?"** Max's voice flooded my mind, making me flinch at the questioning rumble.

*You sound upset.*

**"Just dealing with rumor bullshit."**

Raf was looking at me with curiosity, and I signaled to him and Edwin that I was having a mental conversation by pointing to my head.

*What rumor?*

**"About a Rejected Queen by the name of Alexis."**

I couldn't ignore the way my stomach flipped with the dread of such a rumor being spread the evening of the ball. It was going to screw up our plans.

*Why would someone do that? I mean...what did I do? No way would anyone in my circle spread such a rumor. Edwin and Rafael would never. I know you and your brothers wouldn't. Do you think it was Arwen?*

**"He's still in the dungeon,"** Max admitted, but it felt like he already knew who it was.

*You know who's spreading the rumors.*

***"And they will be dealt with promptly. Yuki and Simon are on the search for them. A bit of questioning will bring out the truth."***

*So...torture.*

***"Essentially."***

*I'll be there shortly. Edwin finished destroying my back.*

***"The dress is old school, I know. Roza said it was the best one that would fit your frame."***

*Is it potentially your mother's, like the black dress I'd borrowed?*

***"It is." He sounded pleased with the question. "Funny how my mom is letting you borrow clothes even though she has yet to meet you."***

*I hope to meet her expectations.*

***"Trust me. You've surpassed them."***

*Should I send Edwin and Rafael to aid with security?*

Max actually needed a moment to think about it. ***"It would be helpful. Every time there's a ball, there's always some jaw-dropping news given to us the moment we sit down after brief introductions. I doubt this year will be any different. With these rumors, it's better to be safe than sorry."***

*I should go with a new name then, shouldn't I? Maybe Maeve? Or Eve. At least I'd respond.*

***"You won't change your name,"*** he urged and from the sternness in his voice, it was non-negotiable. ***"Your guest name will be Alexandra Atlas. If we have to go with abbreviated names, Alex fits perfectly fine with Max."***

*Shortening it makes me sound like a guy.*

***"Have a problem with that?"***

*No, Alpha. I'll be your male counterpart any day.*

I bet he was rolling his eyes wherever he was, but my little joke had tamed his worries. I could feel them, tiny ripples of anxiety over this gathering of royal superiors. I was sure he was dealing with the agony that struck him when he attended five years ago.

*Alpha...are you okay?*



He hesitated with answering confidentiality, but I could feel him take deep breaths, attempting to calm the troubled waters within.

***"I'll be better when you're here."***

The way my heart swelled at his words made me smile. How I wished my arms could wrap around his body now and give him a comforting squeeze.

*I'll be there soon, Alpha.*

He mentally nodded back, echoing muffles telling me someone was trying to speak to him mentally.

Focusing on the present, I realized Edwin and Rafael were standing a few steps in front of me, assessing my overall look.

"Maximus was asking if he could have both of you assist with security," I voiced. "He said things get tense right off the bat, so he wants to make sure we're protected."

"Makes sense," Rafael admitted. "I looked into this ball thing. Didn't think it was such a big deal, but top royals attend it. Royalty, heirs, Alphas of the top ten packs. This year, due to the situation with the waves, it's state-bound, but it's still a significantly large guest list."

"Aren't they in the slightest bit worried a wave is gonna hit them?" I offered. "Even if it's not a wave, what about those fire walls?"

"I looked into that specifically," Edwin noted. "They chose an area that can't get waves. It's one of the reasons why the location was moved. It would be far more dangerous to have some of the most powerful individuals enter a wave all at once."

"Why?" I inquired.

Rafael was grinning and his eyes flickered with power like his dragon side was trying to inch into the conversation.

"Supernaturals don't care about the rules, Your Majesty," he emphasized as his eyes narrowed. "Give them a tiny opportunity in the realms of the Void, and I guarantee blood will be shed and friends will become enemies in a matter of seconds."

"Seriously?" I was surprised because I really didn't think they would have the guts to go against each other.

"What happens in the waves stays there, right?" Raf used the common phrase that had been thrown around the last few years. "Some of these leaders are drug lords, mafia fathers, CEOs, and very cocky royal leaders that wouldn't hesitate to rub into everyone's faces how powerful they are. Now imagine being thrown into a world with no rules. No cops. No supernatural agents. No one to report to if shit goes south. The chances of being held accountable are slim to none. What does that sound like to you?"

"A free-for-all blood bath," I concluded.

"Exactly," Edwin replied. "It makes sense why he wants us to help with security."

"I think there's more to it," I voiced, rising up and trying to adapt to this corset. I hadn't worn one of these in years, but I liked how it put my imprint on display while my cleavage was on point.

"What's wrong?" Edwin questioned with a judgemental brow raise.

"Someone is spreading rumors that a girl named Alexis is a Rejected Queen," I summed up.

The way the two of them scowled in anger at such news made me nervously chuckle. "I feel sorry for whoever is going to feel your wrath."

"Does Maximus know who it is?" Raf inquired.

"He's sending his Betas to track the person down. It just makes things a bit complicated. I offered to go with Maeve or Eve since I'd respond, but Maximus wouldn't have any of that."

"You shouldn't have to go with another alias. Clearly, someone plotted this on purpose."

"I guess, but who did I fucking mess with that would try to screw up my reputation? Normally I'd kill them, so maybe I was sloppy."

The two of them exchanged a look before Edwin grumbled, "We'll look into it."

"Meaning it'll be dealt with before the end of this banquet," Raf concluded.

"I think you guys are making it a big deal. People call others names all the time. It doesn't bother me."

"It bothers us," Edwin stressed. "You are a queen everyone should be bowing down to. They shouldn't be disrespecting your name."

"They don't know it's me," I offered with a shrug. "I mean, it sucks, but Max said my name will be Alexandra Atlas, so..."

Raf's frown lifted into a sly grin. "So you two are married?"

My cheeks grew red as I pouted my lips at the mention of us being together.

"Only I could be single on Monday, mated on Wednesday, and married on Sunday," I concluded. "This week has been from hell."

"Better than that expedition jackass," Edwin grumbled.

"And who is that?" I inquired as I made my way to the mirror. "Max kept bringing up some Grayson dude and mentioned Eric. He was surprised that I didn't know who Grayson was and kept asking. Is he some sort of prince or something? I know Eric is a traitor who was Max's Beta, but I don't recall meeting either of them prior to this week of madness."

Looking into the mirror, I admired the outstanding dress that shifted from a shimmering pink to blazing orange. It was decorated with gold flakes while the ribbon design in the front was emerald-and-teal, matching the floral rose trimming along the top part of the corset that cradled my breasts and matched the bottom trim of the high-low dress.

The front side of the wonderful fabric reached my knees, but the back held a hint of a trail, reminding me of the array of dresses I used to wear from my mother's wardrobe.

I wondered if they would have been proud to see me. I may not have accomplished as much as I would have wished, but it was a blessing to be alive and have a chance at reclaiming our title for the world to see.

My hair was still short, but with a bit of a curl, giving the bright pink strands some body while the golden tiara sitting upon my head emphasized my black roots. My tiny white strands held a bit of a golden effect, meshing perfectly with the overall outfit.

With my makeup on point and my lips cloaked with plum lipstick, I felt like I was somewhat in my element. A bit of who I was was now in the attire that reminded me of the past me.

My stance had straightened automatically, those royal habits engrained into my routine for so many years always triggering when I wore such lavish attire. Weird how I missed those scolding royal advisors and their perfectionist tendencies.

"Alexandra."

I looked over my shoulder to acknowledge their concerned looks.

"What?"

"Did you hit your head in the wave?" Raf genuinely asked.

"Ugh no," I whined. "I don't know if I have amnesia. I've concluded I can't recall anyone I've had a fling with or who was basically deemed unimportant in my mind. I don't know. Every time I try to recall people other than you two, it's just black. Plus, it gives me headaches, and no one's got time for that. Is it going to be troublesome?"

"No," Edwin calmly responded. "None of them are important. They'll add stress to your pretty head."

"Awww. When you say it like that, it actually shows you care," I reasoned with a press of my hand to my chest for added dramatics.

"Maew."

I blinked as I felt the lick to my cheek. I turned my head to see Echo sitting upon my right shoulder. "Hey, Echo. What are you doing here? I thought you left with Max."

"Maew," he replied and brushed his head against my cheek before moving along my shoulder to my left side just to stare at Edwin and Raf.

"Why do I feel like this cat is trying to kick us out?" Raf whispered to Edwin as he crossed his arms over his chest.

"Cause that's what he wants to do," Edwin muttered, looking unimpressed, but I think we could all agree if Echo was here, there was a big chance Maximus and the others needed Edwin and Rafael. "They really could use some extra sets of hands. All four brothers are attending the ball."

"All four?" I questioned. "Is Roza attending, too?"

"Maew."

"He said he's unsure," Edwin translated.

"I doubt she'd want to attend, honestly," Rafael admitted as he stretched his arms. "She's a Seer, correct?"

"Yes," I replied.

"They're not good with crowded events. Triggers far too many visions, which puts her at risk and can be severely draining on her body."

"When you say it like that, you have a point," I replied with a bob of my head. "You guys can go. Uh...I know how to get to the underground tunnel, but won't it ruin my dress? Plus, I'll probably catch every lingering person's attention in this outfit."

Edwin understood what I was emphasizing as he took a long look at me up and down before walking over and gesturing for me to lift my left hand. Observing my wrist, his eyes lingered on the shimmering imprint around my ring finger.

"He actually proposed to you." He said it like it was fact, which got Raf's attention as he moved in to view the slightly illuminating tattooed band.

"Wow. He's serious. I'm surprised you guys didn't have sex all day long."

I blushed at his comment while giving him an unimpressed scowl.

"After the week we've had, I think a girl needs a rest day. Plus...we did do the deed a few times. I was just tired," I summed up. "What? You going to go on a rant about how much you hate him like you do...well, everyone who wants to date me?"

"No," he answered as he snapped the fingers of his free hand, creating a black bracelet with a tiny ruby rhinestone in the middle. He placed it on my wrist, and I shivered with the magic that swept along my flesh.

"I'm fine with him."

That left me frozen with my mouth wide opened like a shocked fool, while Rafael slowly turned his gaze to Edwin like he'd lost his damn mind.

"Are you being serious?"

"I am," he replied and let go of my hand. "I don't have a problem with him."

He headed towards the doorway, and I blinked out of shock and asked, "Why?"

He stopped at the doorframe, then turned around as I continued, "Why are you okay with Maximus uh...well...him being my mate?"

"You don't need X-ray vision to see what great lengths he's willing to go through to be by your side, Alexandra," Edwin whispered as his red eyes bored into mine. "Besides, I never gave much attention to the males that dated you or if they were a good match. All I had to do was look into your eyes to know you didn't love any of them."

I didn't know what to say to combat his revelation, and he gave me a true smile.

"For the first time in your adult life, I see that glint of love in your eyes. That's all I need to know because you finally trust someone other than myself and Rafael to catch you when you fall."

Rafael was standing at my side with a big smile on his face while I was trying not to get emotional at Edwin's words.

"Have fun, Your Majesty," Raf hummed as he reached out to wipe away the single tear that rolled down my cheek. "We'll be watching you rise to the occasion."

With a slight wave of my hand, I watched them leave my room and eventually my suite, giving me a chance to look in the mirror once more with

my glassy eyes locked onto the reflection of those orange orbs.

"Maew?"

I smiled and lifted my hand to stroke Echo's head.

"I'm okay, Echo," I replied. "I guess...it's good to finally be happy."

*Being loved never felt so good.*

With a bob to my reflection, I paused when I remembered the jewelry Edwin had placed on me. "Wait. What the hell does this do?"

"Maew!" Echo jumped down to the ground, and I followed to see I was wearing my usual attire of leather badassery.

"Wow." I couldn't help being surprised by the slight mindfuck. My gaze peered over to the mirror to see I still indeed wore my dress, but staring down at my own body, I saw my usual harness crop top, back short combo. It even included my fishnet leggings and fingerless gloves.

"Man, Edwin has some amazing voodoo he's got to teach me. I wanna make fancy illusion jewelry."

I decided to get going. I had everything I needed as I made sure my place was neat once more. Looking around the space suddenly emphasized many things that I lacked.

*Pictures of loved ones and art on the walls, ornaments with significant meanings to them. That sensation of being...home.*

It would be difficult to get anything done with this part of the city on lockdown, but I knew what I wanted to do when we were free to roam the streets again.

*I want to find a place to truly call home.*

There was a knock on the door that tugged me out of the nostalgia, and it was honestly perfect timing since I was heading out anyways. Penthouses and suites all got special magazine deliveries, but I normally wasn't here to claim them.

"Hello. You can leave the delivery just on the isla-" I trailed off when I opened the door and my eyes landed on a pair of hazelnut ones.

"Hey, Alexis," he greeted with a smile. "I'm glad I listened to my instincts and came by your penthouse first."

I looked at the bouquet of purple flowers in his hands, my nose wrinkling at the odd scent that was rather irritating to my senses.

"I was called for an emergency during the last wave but overheard you got hurt. Are you okay? I would have been there to assist if it wasn't for-"

"Who are you?" I couldn't help cutting him off because he just wasn't ringing a damn bell to me and the floral scent was really making my nose itch. "And I hope those aren't for me because I think I'm allergic."

He stared back at me with a frown as he blinked in confusion.

"Alexis, stop messing around. I'm-"

"The delivery guy?" I cut to the chase. "Ugh. I feel so bad for you guys. They're really making you deliver flowers when it looks like the apocalypse outside? The hustle life never ends, huh? I guess that's New York for you."

Reaching for the flowers, I frowned at their intense smell as I took them. "Oh god. Ya. Nope. I'm so fucking allergic to these. I'm sorry, I can't take this bouquet. Can you let the concierge desk know to stop my deliveries until this whole lockdown fiasco is over...ACHOO!" I sneezed and felt dizzy as hell.

"Alexis, are you okay?" the man asked. I swore it felt like I'd pass out any second, but something pressed against my back, securing my body before it could fall back while removing the bouquet from my grasp.

"Now, now. I thought we canceled these deliveries already," a mocking voice hummed from behind me before the flowers themselves burst into flames. My eyes widened as the male took a step back, but the scent that was igniting this hazy heaviness upon my consciousness began to fade.

*What the fuck?*

It took me a second to realize I couldn't feel Eve for a hot minute, but not a second later she was back and was fuming mad.

***"What the fucking hell just happened?"***

*You're asking the wrong person here, Eve. I'm just as confused as you*



are. *It's like that haze that happened during the wave expedition.*

***"It felt exactly like that. Are you okay? Who's holding us?"***

*Oh.*

I should have focused on that, and with the lift of my head, I locked onto the familiar pink eyes that looked down at me with mischief.

"Good evening, Mrs. Atlas. Sorry for the random drop-in. Alpha Maximus Atlas encouraged me to promptly pick you up."

"E...Echo?" I blinked a few times as I gawked at the man. I swore this wave of déjà vu was messing with me because surely I hadn't seen this being of shadow hotness prior to this. His attractiveness didn't do things to me like Max's presence did, but he carried a lethal aura around him with a dose of trickery.

"You totally give me Cheshire Cat vibes," I voiced.

"Many love to compare me to that smiling cat," he replied, and his grin widened to its full capacity, revealing his white teeth while his eyes moved back to the man before us. "I'm rather sneaky in nature, but I don't bite. Unless enticed, of course."

I returned my gaze to the man as he bowed his head.

"I'm sorry. I'll...let the desk know not to make any more deliveries until things are solved."

"Good," Echo replied on my behalf. "Make a note that Wolfsbane bouquets are banned in this building. They carry very potent properties that are potentially lethal to shifters in general. I know they like using them to decorate purple roses for supernaturals, but this one had far too much."

*Holy fucking shit. That thing could have actually killed me?!*

***"Someone must have sent it to us. You think one of the royals at the banquet knows we're attending?"***

*What if it's a jealous ex of Max's wishing to get rid of us before the banquet?*

***"How bold with a dose of pathetic cowardness,"*** Eve snarled. ***"Let's kill***

**her!"**

*As easy as that sounds, I think it would cause drama.*

**"Hmph. Better than being dead."**

*Valid point.*

"Shall we go?" Echo offered. He now stood between me and the delivery guy and offered his hand. I could now see the wonderful suit he wore with his top hat tipped to the side. I was totally impressed that Echo could shapeshift into an actual person, but I'd leave my praise for later.

"Yes. Don't want to make my Alpha wait," I declared as I placed my left hand in his grasp. I caught a glimpse of the delivery person staring at my hand in shock, but I dismissed it.

*These delivery guys are so weird.*

With a close of my door and a magical lock that only reacted to my flames, we began to walk down the hall, leaving the man behind.

"Shouldn't we have gotten his name? Just in case they ask who brought us the flowers?" I asked, my voice echoing from the hollowness of the walls.

Echo looked over to me as we reached the elevator.

"It's not important," he urged. "Let's pass by the desk now and let them lock the stair entrance so you can only access your place with the private elevator. No need to have it open when you're not expecting any guests for a while, right?"

"Certainly," I agreed. "Frankly, those flowers were ugly. The pink ones on the island are way prettier."

Echo's grin was priceless as he lifted my hand and lightly pressed his lips to the back of my hand. "I'm glad they make you happy, Alexandra," he whispered. "Now, let's get you to your fated Alpha."

"Yes," I replied with a beaming smile, the two of us walking into the elevator and watching the doors closed.

*With a solid ring of protectors around us, I'll be nothing but safe at Maximus's side.*



## REJECTED GAMBIT

**"You can see that bitch from a fucking mile away,"** Eve snarled.

I bit my bottom lip while my eyes locked onto the obvious center of attention in the grand ballroom. The woman, wearing a fitted white dress of pearls, laughed and flicked her white locks as if the straight strands were getting in her way for the millionth time.

With striking red lipstick to finish the "pure" look, you had a woman who played her role perfectly - *a villainous queen who was loved by many, smiling and portraying an act of pure innocence to bring all the moths to her burning flame.*

Except I knew better.

I could feel the chill of her energy all the way from here, the tainted mystery that hid behind her facade. I didn't need Max or anyone else to confirm who this individual was.

*There's no doubt in my mind that she's Cynthia.*

My eyes further scanned the room before noticing Cynthia's movement as she effortlessly talked and walked. My blood boiled as she flaunted her flawless pale complexion while her hair flowed gallantly with her movements.

I despised her based on the simple knowledge that she'd hurt my king - *my Maximus, who was at his weakest back then thanks to the abuse she*

*delivered because of her extreme standards.*

I had no idea how a woman could want so much in a man and toss out the idea of genuine love and support, but then again, her morals were wrapped around the solid desire of being around those who would do her bidding.

*That's why she cheated on him.*

I realized in seconds how close she was to Maximus, my eyes finally picking him out of the crowd as he stood next to Richard and Alpha Surge. I could feel the sudden spike of tension within our connection coming from Max's side, and though he did his best to hide it as he continued to converse with the others, the closer she moved towards his group, the more rigid he became.

Someone moved in between the groups, stopping Cynthia with a wave before they greeted one another and began to chitchat.

This was the perfect opportunity to get to my Alpha's side, and I had Eve's energy backing me up.

"Ready to put on a show, Your Majesty."

I blinked as I looked to my left to see Echo was back with a glass of champagne and our specific wristbands. He offered the glass to me. I looked at him in relief and didn't hesitate to take it and down the liquid in one swift movement.

"Why does that make me feel like you're going to fuck shit up?" he inquired with a taunting grin.

"That's exactly what I aim to do," I declared as my eyes were already looking back to check on Maximus. With how crowded it was getting, he wouldn't be able to simply sneak out of there, and though he sensed my energy, I was positive he couldn't see me from the entrance since the doors were only opened enough to see a good chunk of the middle.

I wished his brothers were nearby, but I knew Maximus wouldn't rely on them in public.

*This was his battle that he had to face. He just needed a little helping*

*hand.*

"Can't go making an ex-girlfriend jealous in that," Echo noted, bringing my attention back to the bracelet along my wrist. He removed it on my behalf, and I was a little thankful that the door guards were standing inside, leaving the hallway rather empty for my grand entrance.

"Thank you, Echo," I whispered and gave him a hopeful look. "You really gotta tell me more about yourself and all the cool things you can do. I love this form."

His whole face lit up as he bowed his head.

"I'll certainly take your advice, Your Majesty," he assured me before snapping his fingers. I felt the difference in my heels and looked down to see my six-inch stilettos were the perfect pink shade with golden flakes and teal ribbon laces.

A glimmering look of bubbling excitement surely flooded my face as I returned my gaze to him and noticed his white-toothed smile.

*A girl always feels like a badass bitch in the perfect stilettos.*

"Let them see the potential you carry, Queen," he encouraged. "A taste of your fire."

With a nod in his direction, I turned to face the doors as I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. For a second, I let myself dive right into the roots of my unconsciousness and secretly requested Maeve's assistance.

*Please, Maeve. Shed a glimpse of your power so we can make our mark.*

For a split second, I saw her image within me, encouraging a foreign warmth to flood my insides and lightly trickle through my flesh.

Opening my eyes shed light on a slightly different perspective; the hues of the colors were far brighter, as if I were in my wolf form, but I could see the vivid energies of all those around me.

*The good intentions and the bad ones.*

Without a moment to waste, I began to walk forward, my hips moving side to side as my dress trailed behind me. The doors opened further as if

sensing my presence and one by one, people began to look my way.

Each click of my heels triggered another stopped conversation as eyes moved to me. Individuals in various attire that sparkled and gave off exquisite outlooks shuffled out of my way to make a path towards my prize.

That internal bubble of tense anxiety was overpowered by a spike of hopefulness when Maximus's eyes found mine. With one look, he was completely entranced, like I'd laid an bewitching spell upon him.

Only he was captivated by everything I displayed in this moment, his eyes licking me up from head to toe as he slowly offered his almost finished glass of wine to anyone who would take it from him.

Someone thankfully did, which gave him the opportunity to continue to give me all his attention as I got closer and closer to him. I didn't wear a fake smile, nor was I here to be friendly to any of these hypocrites.

My commanding vibe, demanding aura, and resting bitch face would ensure everyone stayed the fuck away from me.

*Only the loyal deserve to be acknowledged by someone of my burning authority.*

I purposely slowed down when I passed Cynthia, and like the world had slowed down with me, I made sure to take my utmost time shifting my gaze to meet hers.

There was that slightly shocked face as if she were truly intrigued by my arrival, but I saw past the layers of deceit, catching the pinch of envy that wished to choke every bit of my breath away while battling my fire with her wave of ice.

The heightened joy in her expression dipped slightly, and I was sure no one else would have noticed, but I did, and how fucking glorious it was to see it as my lips curled just enough to ensure she knew I caught it.

*Time to remind her of what she could have enjoyed.*

With three steps, I was standing before Maximus, and I was ready to pull him down for a kiss, but he moved far faster in a flawless movement that

surely didn't seem feasible with his large, chiseled frame.

In a second, his arm was hooked around my slim frame while his lips interlocked with mine in the sweetest yet firmest kiss I'd experienced with him. It was a hint of dominance with a dose of compassion, while he held me like a diamond being presented to the world.

He pulled back. Our eyes met once more, and there was not an ounce of fear in them now as pride and relief filtered through our bond and only empowered us further, like we were in our own little bubble against the world.

**"Good evening, Mate,"** he greeted me with his Alpha power sizzling through the air - loud and clear for the world to hear.

"Good evening, Mate," I replied with immense pride as I smiled just for him. "Sorry for my tardiness. I got an unexpected delivery that had to be sorted."

"Nothing has started," he assured me. "You remember Alpha Rogue and Alpha Surge from the expedition."

"Yes," I replied and turned my attention to greet them. They stood in fitted suits just like Maximus, who wore a light bubble gum pink suit with golden flakes to match my dress's design and an orange tie.

His hair was actually left down, which looked stunning and gave a softness to his features even though his body was all masculine with a mega-dose of testosterone.

"I've missed your presence, Fallen Beauty," Richard greeted and bowed. "About time people got to see Maximus's mate."

"Good evening, Luna," Alpha Surge greeted, which impressed me as I looked over to him. "It's been a while since we've seen you after the alliance."

"Agreed. Things have been quite busy, and the unexpected ball tops it all off," I answered as I melted into Max's side, feeling confident and comfortable with him holding me so securely. "We have a lot to discuss once the night of festivities is over."



Richard laughed. "Let's leave the business of alliances to tomorrow, Fallen Beauty. It'll give me a reason to continue to despise Mondays."

"I agree with Alpha Rogue. It's been a while since we've gotten to mingle in our society. We'll talk business next week. Alpha Maximus, you did want to show your mate the gala room before things got rolling, correct? It would be nice to show your Luna the artwork Roza did."

"Ah. That would be smart. My brothers are probably still there taking pictures. I should aim to get one," Max agreed and returned his heavy gaze to me. "Shall we, my Queen of Flames?"

"Lead the way, King of Frost."

I swear this level of acting was going to get me a damn Oscar and a movie deal, because all eyes were still on us even when we began to make our way towards the left top corner of the room.

I did catch on to the slight look Maximus took in Cynthia's direction, and my heart skipped in glee because there was no hint of lust in those eyes.

Those orbs of snowflakes were heartless, but behind it all, I caught the true emotion he knew she'd feel within her being.

*The beautiful shimmer of revenge.*

Our departure ignited a wave of whispers, and I knew everyone was wondering who the hell I was. Obviously, this was a royal ball, which meant I couldn't attend unless I had royal blood or status, but who would know who I was wearing such glamorous attire?

Max lead the way until we reached a quieter hall that led to a tiny room. I caught sight of Beta Yuki and Beta Simon. The two of them beamed at our entrance and took me in. They bowed in respect, but there was no time for conversation as Max led me into the room.

I thought it was the entrance to the gala, but no.

*It was a powder room.*

The moment the door closed, I was spun around, pressed against the door, and made into a captive of lustful passion as his lips devoured mine in

seconds.

"Ma-" I couldn't even speak as he kissed me relentlessly while he held me against him. I'd clearly have to touch up my gloss because it would be wiped away by the way this man was kissing me hungrily.

I couldn't help but submit to him, moaning into his mouth and letting my hands roam around his body. How could anyone have such control over my body? He invited me into his cunning web of seduction and allowed me to succumb to his every whim.

My breath shuddered as he managed to make a way for his knee between my legs, and all he had to do was lift his leg just slightly to rub me perfectly - stimulating my pussy, which was already quivering in need.

"Maximus," I moaned, and he tugged on my bottom lip and delivered a kiss of frost in an attempt to punish my blazing lips.

***"Do they think they can have you?"*** he growled venomously. ***"How they mocked me in pure elation but now want what I've claimed."***

He was angry; his built-up rage boiled to the surface as he submerged his tongue into my mouth, leaving me no choice but to obey. I was a prisoner of his fury, the culprit of his brutal jealousy, and I'd be the victim of the shattering pleasure that was growing closer and closer to breaking through the surface.

***"My mate. My Luna. All fucking mine!"*** His hands forced my hands to cross upward, one keeping them pressed against the golden wooden surface while the other held my throat. He tightened his greedy grip as he forced me to tilt my head back to stare into his eyes of lethal scrutiny.

"You'll look into my eyes when you cum at my will," he seethed. "You belong to nobody else but me, and I'll make sure they know it. They'll all know that I've found my queen, and none of them can take her away from me."

My euphoric explosion was inching closer, and Maximus quickened the pace as he ground against me. The dense air was thick with the musk of my

arousal, kindling a ball of rumbles from Max. I was positive his release was as close as mine was.

It felt so good. To be fucking in public knowing damn well his Betas were listening. It felt like a punishment, one that should have delivered a wave of shame, but it did the complete opposite.

*I felt fucking alive...so empowered, beautiful, and free.*

To be fucked senseless by my Alpha's thigh after putting on a performance that finally gave me a taste of the spotlight I'd craved for years was exhilarating. It was just a little sample of what I could have all the time, and I was fucking hooked.

Max moved in an animalistic manner, his throat hold tightening further as he stared down to watch every inch of emotion that flooded my face. My moans danced in the air along with his grunting groans. I knew we'd cum together as we braced for the sweet friction that would override our senses and vibrate through our bodies.

***"Let me see you cum for me. Cum now, Alexandra!"***

I came undone as I cried out in ecstasy, his name leaving my lips in a breathy gasp. "Maximus!"

We rode every wave of euphoric victory, and Max released me just so he could hold me against him in a tight hug. We had our time to catch our breaths, attempting to regulate our bodies, which were still coming down from our unified high.

He then kissed me until echoed muffles littered through our connection.

"Stupid ball," he grumbled between his heavy exhales but dipped between my neck and shoulder to leave a very obvious hickey against my flesh.

My body was buzzing with energy. I was positive I smelled like Maximus and our night of freaky sex: *the perfect mixture of ownership.*

"I want to make sure they all fucking smell me on you." He growled so deeply, I wasn't sure if it was him or Adam.

*Heck, it could be Adamson.*

***"You are mine, Alexandra. None of them can take what's mine. Understood?"***

"Yes, Alpha," I humbly answered, knowing just how much it would please him.

After one more passionate kiss, he let me fix my lip gloss, and we were back in the main room with Beta Simon and Beta Yuki trailing behind.

Most individuals were settled in their seats, which brought the room's attention to us once more as we confidently waltzed to the table where all three of Max's brothers sat with Alpha Rogue, Alpha Surge, and Echo.

Echo looked the most pleased with our arrival, like an excited child waiting for his parents, only he was in his adult form.

Reaching our designated seats, Maximus pulled the chair out for me and made sure I sat down before taking his own. The move encouraged the announcer to waltz onto the stage that gave off a glamorous skyline view of the unaffected city buildings and glistening lake.

He began the introductions.

I expected there to be loads, but nope. He cut right to the chase.

"To begin this banquet, we've officially chosen the candidates who will be representatives of the Royale Grandmasters. As you know, positions like these are given to individuals every five years and they are not only chosen with the approval of multiple Seers around the state, but are blessed by the Goddess of the Sun and Goddess of the Moon. With the recent events in the Void Mastery and the wave manipulation, it was emphasized by the highest leaders and rulers of our hierarchy that we'd ensure these individuals were chosen and announced so they can speak to our lead Grandmaster and get to work in aiding our community."

He looked around the room, his blonde hair glimmering under the spotlight, just like his golden suit. "I will announce the official chosen candidates. If you are chosen, please rise and wait for all names to be announced before making your way to the stage."

With a pause, he began announcing the names.

"Alpha and Prince Maddox Atlas."

My eyes moved to see Maddox as he rose, and many clapped in approval. He maintained his emotionless expression, but he did notice my gaze and gave a slight smirk my way.

"Next," the announcer declared. "Alpha and Prince Maverick Atlas."

That got a few shocked gazes as Maverick rose. He had his usual 'fuck with me and you die' expression, but he looked at Maddox and they lightly fist bumped each other's hands in greeting.

"Next," the announcer continued. "Alpha and Prince Mason Atlas."

Now people were really shocked, including Mason, as he slowly rose up and looked to his brothers, who actually were surprised.

***"They're giving these powerful positions to three brothers?"*** Eve quietly muttered. ***"Ain't that suspicious."***

*And going to ignite a bunch of enemies.*

"Next up," the announcer carried through. "Alpha and Future Heir, Maximus Atlas."

The room went wild at the decision as Maximus let go of my hand after giving me a light kiss on my lips so he could rise up. The way he stood alone was like a king rising up to claim his throne, and I couldn't help but clap while looking proudly at him.

Eve's energy trickled into me, enough to divert my attention from our mate to see the pure shock on Cynthia's face as she sat at the table to the far left of ours. I did notice a few of the rather envious and venomous expressions already forming on a few individual's faces, but their auras didn't worry me in the slightest.

Our table was filled with pure energy and that was all that mattered to me.

"We have one special guest who would like to continue appointing positions. Please welcome our youngest and most powerful Royale Grandmaster," the announcer declared as he gestured behind me. "Alpha and

Prince Artemis Wolfbane."

And my heart fucking stopped. No...it froze solid like a block of ice.

A tall, striking man with slightly tanned skin and short pink strands with black roots wearing a fitted black suit emerged from the shadows to stand in the middle of the stage. The golden cape upon his shoulders was heavy with magic, and it was clear from the power pulsating from his body that his wolf was presently in power.

If the sight didn't confirm my instincts, it was those striking pink eyes with hints of orange and gold that locked onto mine for a brief second - *acknowledging who I was...to him.*

"It's a pleasure to have you all here," he began. His voice was soft and yet commanded the room to a lull of silence. "My name is Artemis Wolfbane, the current Grandmaster and youngest leader. I'm sure I've proven my maturity in the last five years, but nevertheless, I request the current four chosen Grandmasters to come onto the stage."

Max's brothers made their way, but I noticed Maximus lingered - his eyes obviously on me as he felt my shock.

*He...he's my younger brother.*

Maximus tamed his surprise as he slightly nodded in acknowledgment and began to make his way to the stage like his brothers, but his voice trickled through my mind.

***"Be calm. We'll figure out what the hell is going on with this."***

*Okay.*

I couldn't say more as I tried to tame my heart that was clearly beating at a crazy pace.

They situated themselves on the stage while I noticed Echo move to sit next to me, his hand reaching out to simply lay on my knee - reminding me that he was there.

"Normally, we come up with four positions, but with the specific guidance of the Goddess of the Moon, this individual's name was picked

unanimously by every Seer and being of power. To further strengthen the decision, this individual has been on the list of recommendations consistently for the last five years."

That got everyone's attention, and for some reason, I noticed the way Cynthia was smiling from ear to ear and waiting on the edge of her seat.

*Please don't tell me it's going to her.*

The thought made me cringe, but Artemis went right to it.

"Now for the chosen leader for the next five years who will be personally trained by me. Please rise, Alpha Alexandra Atlas, Luna of North Atlas Pack!"

I noticed Cynthia had risen as if she'd been called, only for his words to register and those hopeful eyes to crumble like the layers of her facade. Spheres of malice located the culprit of fury.

*All eyes landed on me.*

That flickering flame of empowerment pushed through me, and I slowly rose while fighting a wave of emotions. I tried to tame them, or whatever was brewing in the immense jubilee, but it danced and grew, and that was when I felt it.

*Oh no...*

All it took was a glimpse of the pink-filled tattoo to send my heart on a wild ride of skips as the tingling sensation of heat rushed along my arms, igniting goosebumps while the true heaviness of our approaching problem settled into my mind.

*I was just given a position that supernaturals only achieve every five years...and more importantly, the decision-maker and leader just so happened to be my younger brother.*

I lifted my gaze and was urged to meet those snowflake orbs that were wide with shock. He wasn't rendered speechless by the news of my appointed position. Not in the slightest.

The waves of fear flowed straight into our connective tunnel, forcing him

to pick up on what I was sensing as the thought finally registered in proper English within my brain while my body prepared for the flaming mayhem I'd just instigated.

**"Alexandra,"** Eve whispered in horror as we caught onto the wall of glimmering orange and pink upon the horizon. **"What did you just do?"**

There was no way of avoiding the ultimate truth as I let the words slip into my consciousness.

*I think I just triggered a wave.*

*In a world of rules, a Queen's Gambit could be a risky execution to win in an unraveling gamble, but in the realms of the Void Mastery, there were no rules.*

***Only blood, sweat, and tears.***

*A Rejected Gambit is what may potentially lead to our survival, but how many will be sacrificed to move around the center ploy of deception?*

***A Queen of Flames shall find out by making the first move.***

**TO BE CONTINUED.**

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*Now turn the page for a Sneak Peek of Demon Valley Pack - Pretty Little  
Monster Trilogy  
- Avery S.*

## Demon Valley Pack

~Pretty Little Monster Trilogy~

<https://smarturl.it/DemonValleyPack>



### BLURB:

*"Fated love means nothing when we can avoid extinction. One tiny sacrifice will appease the shadows. It's a shame, really. You've always been my pretty little monster."*

Those were the last words I heard from my Alpha, my fated mate, before his Beta tossed me off the cliff into a land of no return: Demon Valley, the place

where no human or wolf shifter survives. Legends claim there's an escape from the shadowy, demon-infested haven, but no one has ever returned to confirm the truth.

*Except me.*

There's a reason no one comes back from Demon Valley, and when I reach the end of its dark tunnel, I finally understand why. At that grand exit lies a place of rejected salvation. Our Goddess may have blessed me with the ultimate plot for revenge, starting with the Alpha of Nightmare Daemons himself.

**Malifer Nightshade.**

*A beast of shadows. A seductive master. Creator of this forbidden valley.  
And the rejected older brother of my Alpha.*

To gain salvation, one must be tested. For me, that means destroying my bond with the Alpha I expected to spend my life with. After his shattering betrayal, it's the only option, and I won't deny the ultimate truth.

*I'm angry – **broken** – and with the help of these very addictive shadows, I'll show my old pack of deceitful wolves exactly what a pretty little monster I can be.*

## PROLOGUE: PRETTY LITTLE MONSTER

"No hard feelings?"

My body stilled for five long seconds, my jaw dropping as his words triggered a venomous surge of rage.

"No hard feelings?" I repeated his words before I fought with every bit of strength to get out of Beta Derrick's hold so I could punch this motherfucking Alpha in the damn face. "You're sacrificing me to a demonic cloud of death to appease the hunger of the Moon Demon Goddess from devouring our entire pack, and you're going to say 'no hard feelings'?!"

I sounded hysterical as I growled and almost slipped out of Derrick's grasp. I swore the Goddess had to at least have mercy on my racing heart and give me one fucking chance to punch this cynical bastard for thinking I deserved such an ended fate.

*Alpha Nathan Shade, temporary leader of the Shade Moon Pack.*

In the last three days, I watched my previous best friend of fifteen long-ass years go from kind, loving, romantic, and hoping to share a future with me, to shifting into this power-hungry, cynical bastard who was more interested in a cunt for power lineages than me.

The very bitch was standing on his left side, smirking like she'd won the fucking lottery after being the biggest slut of the outskirts of Vancouver. I'd lost count as to how many shifters she'd slept with, and yet now Nathan was

suddenly all over her like she was worth something valuable.

Lauren Fox was the only daughter of our partnered pack's Alpha, Fox Moon Pack. She was cocky, privileged, and acted like a spoiled brat in a candy store. Anything she wanted, she got it, but Nathan was the only thing she couldn't have.

*For he was mated to me.*

Our mate bond had triggered at sixteen, and the last four years, we'd been a couple. I may not have the hooker looks, curves, or a pretty face, but I was strong. I could fight with the right training, and was fast at running. My brain wasn't filled with useless dramas and television shows, and I was working towards learning how to be a healer to be a backup to the pack.

No, I didn't have Alpha potential like Lauren did.

My skin wasn't flawless like her creamy white complexion, nor did I carry bountiful breasts and hips. My hair was an odd mix of pink and black, shifting between the colors while there were multiple white strands that honestly made it look like I had grey hair. Black eyes and 5'4" height and well, I was what they would call a "common" bitch.

Adding the fact my wolf was submissive wasn't helping my current situation. I thought this bitch would ensure my worst nightmare came true: *losing my Alpha to another woman.*

I'd prayed to our Goddess for so many years, begging her to ensure Nathan would always be mine to cherish, regardless of power, rank, and ultimately, fame.

*But all of that changed with the murder attempt.*

One thing led to another, and it was confirmed that Nathan's father did something bad - *very bad*. Threatening enough that he was plagued with a coma disease that was eating the flesh of his skin by tainting it with a black plague.

The solution? A sacrifice to Demon Valley, but it couldn't be anyone this time. The requirement to remove the deadly eating disease is a virgin maiden

at the ripe age of twenty, and only one person in this entire pack fits that deceptive description.

Me.

There was always something stopping me from having sex with Nathan. In the bedroom, I was shy, but more importantly, with all the healing rituals I needed to learn, being a virgin was one of the requirements.

*The hardest requirement that no one wanted to commit to.*

I took the role as an honourable one, knowing well that my last day of healing teachings would be three days after my twentieth birthday. Nathan and I were supposed to celebrate...but then the news hit.

*Now I was here, being held by Beta Derrick who should have been the type of friend that tried to stop things from escalating until we figure things together as a group.*

Instead, he was following Nathan's every demand, just so he could be the Beta of the pack.

*Deceitful fuckers!*

"Serves you right, Lexi," Lauren's smug words were going to make her top the list of who was about to get smacked with these hands. "Maybe if you opened your legs early, you wouldn't be on the brink of dying."

"And be a fucking slut like you? Go fuck yourself! Oh, right. You do that when you can't find a man's bed to sleep in!" I snapped.

"Watch your fucking mouth, bitch!" she hissed back. "You're talking to this pack's future Luna."

"Future. We're in the present, Princess Bitch. I'll say whatever the fuck I want. Besides, last time I checked, Nathan was MY mate!"

"Well, you're about to die," Lauren got to the point, trying not to let her emotions flood her face. I knew better, sensing the growing aura of anger that she was probably wishing could be released. "The moment you die, that little bond will go poof."

She lifted her hands to emphasize a burst with her gesture. "Then, Alpha

Nathan and I will be able to do the mating ceremony, unite our packs, and then we can ensure his Father is alive and well. One measly sacrifice isn't a big deal. At the end of the day, it's good riddance. Maybe the valley will like someone ugly like you."

"I'm ugly and yet Nathan has dated me all this while. Guess my looks didn't mean shit then when power and money weren't on the line!" I specifically yelled in Nathan's direction, and I looked into his silver eyes. For a brief moment, I could see the sadness in them, and his wolf had to be fighting against his hold to come and alter this sudden change of fate, but Nathan was a lot stronger.

"He dated you because he had no choice," Lauren sounded bored as she rolled her eyes. "Fated mates are SO overrated. Do you really think our glorious Goddess partnered you," she paused to gesture to my short frame. "With Alpha Nathan?"

She took her time gesturing to the 5'9" male. He wasn't the fiercest looking Alpha, nor was he bulky in stature like his father, but he was just tossed into the position days ago. A bit of working out would be enough to gain the muscle to be fearsome. Silver eyes, hazelnut hair.

He basically gave off pretty boy vibes with a dose of Alpha power.

*Right now, he looked like a piece of shit, but would it matter saying that to his face?*

"It's time," Nathan declared, and I looked at him in disbelief as he approached to stand before me. I continued fighting to get out of Derrick's hold, but my body was so fucking tired of fighting. Two days in the dungeon being tortured and starved, just so I could be "pure" enough to be tossed off a damn cliff.

*And the two people I've trusted for years are okay with doing this very deed. With sacrificing their friend who would put her life on the line if it meant they lived. These are the people I trusted...with my life?*

"Let her go for a second," Nathan commanded to Beta Derrick, but

quickly looked back at me. **“Stay.”**

My body was forced to remain in place, leaving me to mentally curse the shit out of my submissive wolf who was in her corner whimpering in dismay. Didn't she fucking understand? We were about to die! Not me alone.

I knew it wasn't really her choice to disobey, but what happened to the whole “fight or flight” response? That didn't apply to wolf shifters?!

Nathan reached out to grip my chin, our face close as my eyes began to fill with tears. I wasn't crying out of fear of death - *far from it*. I was on the verge of tears because I thought this man would be everything to me.

*No. He was everything to me.*

He was the one to find me that fateful day, and with his small offered hand, he brought me back to his pack to where I've given my utmost loyalty. I didn't once question his authority, or his father's, and did everything in my power to be of use for their kindness.

He became my friend, as many did in this pack, and it shifted into love long before the mate bond was formed. I'd envisioned our future together: to love this man, the pack, and eventually raise a family with him.

My life was set in stone...and all because of power, my whole world was about to shatter.

“Do you know what's going to happen if I don't do this, Lexianne?” he used that tender voice of his. The calm, appreciative voice he used only between us when he wished to speak his true feelings to the people he trusted.

*To me, whom he trusted.*

“My father will die, Lexi, and whatever shit he triggered will plague the entire pack. We'll go extinct before we know it...and I can't watch my pack die. They don't deserve ends like that.”

“I'm a part of your pack!” I hissed. “Does that not matter now?”

His sad smile made his eyes grow glassy as he sighed. “My father never told you, did he?”



*Oh no...*

“See. My dad made it so there was an initial claim for you to join the pack. Think of it like a trial. He did that so he could still have Alpha control over you if need be, but seeing as you were pretty compliant as a kid, it wasn’t necessary. He was supposed to find another pack for you to be transferred to, since you know we don’t have many female shifters in our pack, but due to the trouble tensions during that time with the rise in murdering packs, he decided to keep you until it was safe,” he explained the truth. “Years passed, and well...I guess he forgot.”

“Are you trying to say-”

“You’re an outcast, Lexi,” he got to the point and the emotion of loving compassion flooded his eyes. “You don’t belong in our pack. That’s what makes this a lot easier. Your death won’t mean a loss of our own, which is easier to my Alpha heart.”

“You’re insane,” I whispered. “You’ve been my best friend this whole time. You said you loved me! Yet, you’re...basically rejecting me for the sake of ‘your’ pack?! You’re KILLING me. This isn’t just tossing me out of your community, Nathan! I will fucking die the moment I enter that dark cloud of death! You’re my fated mate!”

“It is what it is, Lexi,” he was clearly tired of listening to my defense as he shook his head and peered into my eyes. “Fated love means nothing when we can avoid extinction. One tiny sacrifice will appease the shadows.”

He moved in close then, until our lips barely touched. “It’s a shame, really. You’ve always been my pretty little monster.”

*Monster. He...thinks of me as a monster?*

The horror must have bled to my eyes, as my tears escaped the grasp of my lids and rolled down my cheeks. “I never really loved you, Lexi. Did I like you? Yeah. How do I explain it? You’re like the perfect puppet to use in a play. The favorite marionette that is loved by everyone. Did you really think I’d be okay marrying a poor, orphaned wolf? What benefit would that

bring to our pack when we're still in the midst of pack wars?"

I was speechless as he shrugged like it was no big deal, his eyes getting colder as if he were shedding old skin.

"Honestly, I was going to reject you on your birthday, but it felt rather cruel to do so. Adding the news about my Father, I simply wasn't in the mental space to complete the deed." He shook his head in dismay. "But this makes it easier. Once you die, the bond will break all on its own. A little pain and I'll get to move on and be with Lauren. I need someone who's knowledgeable in the bedroom. Virgins are rather...." he paused as if he were truly thinking about it. "Boring. Nasty. Just unfavorable pieces of shit."

What do you say to something like that?

"At least you've become useful in times of peril. I'm grateful for that. Give our Goddess, when you meet her, our regards and we pray you enter paradise smoothly."

*He's not being fucking serious.*

Nothing I could say would change what was going to happen. It was inevitable, and he didn't want to change his mind. He was going to get rid of me like a used condom, all because I'd waited so that I'd be pure for the healing ceremony.

All the patience, the mockery I'd endured for not dating when I was younger before the mate bond, and even after. All of that seemed pointless.

*It's the reason why I'm about to die.*

My wolf was listening to every word, her white strands barely exhibiting a hint of illumination after the torture we'd endured. Her pink eyes were peering at me, sadness cloaking them as his hurtful words were finally sinking in.

*That's it? You're just going to accept his words? You're not the slightest bit angry?*

She peered back at me - long and hard as my words repeated in my mind.

*He betrayed us for another woman. Over power...money....greed! He*

*thinks of us as garbage. Used trash. We're an outcast to them. We've never belonged in their minds and now they're sacrificing us! That's fine with you?!*

It wasn't fine in the least , and it didn't matter if you were a dominant or submissive wolf. A lie was a lie, just like a sin was a sin. There was no reason why murder should be justified when I was an innocent shifter who was deceived by the people she thought were her packmates.

My wolf slowly got up, and that's when I saw it.

### **Anger.**

I didn't expect the crushing wave of that very emotion, but it consumed me with a blink of my eyes, and I fucking lost it. No one really saw it coming until I was screaming like a lunatic as I crashed into Nathan and began clawing at his face like a wild, rabid animal.

“How fucking dare you!” I screamed with all my might. “I loved you! Cherished you! Fucking protected you in so many ways, and you have no fucking idea!”

Blood began to shoot into the air while clinging to my skin as I did everything to leave marks all over his face and chest. Someone yanked me off of him, but I kicked between their legs.

“Fuck!” Derrick cursed and went down with me, and I didn't hesitate getting out of his hold and punching the shit out of him. There was nothing stopping me from leaving him with two black eyes compared to my damn Alpha, and he was going to be marked up by my wrath.

“Shit! Get. Fuck!” Derrick didn't stand a chance, but I paused as I sensed the approach coming from my left. I turned my head in time to see Lauren launching at me - the two of us falling over and rolling as we grunted and hissed.

“Just die peacefully, you bitch!” she screamed and now I was ready to

beat the shit out of her as we stopped in a position that I took complete advantage of - her back against the grass while I pinned her to the ground and began punching the shit of her.

“You’re pretty, right? I’ll make sure you’re a fucking disaster!” I vowed as the wind picked up at my declaration. My body vibrated with anger, as I continued to punch and slash her with my long nails. How dare she be worthy of my best friend’s love when she had no damn morals.

She talked shit about him endlessly, since we were kids, and at the end of the day, who stood up for him?

*Me.*

How could she now be my replacement because her family had money - *not her, but her damn pack of filthy bastards who only cared about what benefited them.*

None of this was fair. Life wasn’t fucking fair, but Goddess be damned, I wouldn’t die without fighting.

*Let me mark them with enough anguish that my damn ghost will haunt their fucking dreams!*

Lauren’s screams made me laugh in glee, until a large arm hauled me off of her. I fought against the hold, kicking and screaming like a maniac desperate to get out of an institution, but my body was slammed into the ground, my head hitting a rock that almost knocked me right out.

I hissed in pain as my head became a pounding drum, and my wolf whimpered as she tried to move close enough to the surface to trigger a shift. I was flipped over, a hand around my throat a second later, lifting me up in a smooth movement before we were stampeding towards the cliff.

I forced my eyes open to see Nathan’s fuming expression, my claw marks tainting his flesh that was cloaked in blood. His eyes were wild with anger, but it wasn’t enough for me.

*Those marks would heal. He’d move on the moment I died. No way would I let him.*

I forced my body to move, but his lips were faster, **“FREEZE!”** he screamed.

That tingling wave of Alpha energy fought to completely immobilized me, but I fought with every strand of defiance left in me as I reached out to press my hands against his cheeks, my eyes narrowing with nothing but hate for this man I’d once loved.

“I reject you!” I said with venomous intent. My words shocked him as he came to a blunt stop at the edge of the cliff, leaving me hanging there over the edge as my flushed cheeks streamed with tears and my words echoed around us.

“What...did you say?” How liberating this moment was as my wolf did everything to crawl her numb body to the wall that kept her at bay, her thoughts blending with mine as she finally was on my side. As long as I had one damn person on my side, I’d let the Universe hear my last words.

“I, Lexianne Heartwell, reject you Nathan Shade! May you fucking remain a heartless bastard! May everything you fucking care about slip out of your grasp! You...an Alpha?!” I paused to bark in mocking laughter. “Never! You’ll never be an Alpha! Every member of your pack will betray you like you’re betraying me! I fucking CURSE YOU with Goddess of the Moon as my witness! Every drop of my blood will bring you nothing but MISERY! You will never be loved! Never be cherished, and I swear, I’ll get my revenge! Death is nothing! You will never get what you desire!” I vowed with every bit of breath I had left.

All his emotions fell from his face as his fingers tightened against my neck, choking me. I could feel the bond beginning to break, like a glass beginning to crack little by little. It was going to shatter. There was no way of stopping it, but then Nathan’s lips lifted into a sinister smile.

“Whatever curse won’t do anything to me when you’re dead,” he whispered. “I’ll leave that to the valley. It loves rejects.”

“I...reject you!” I emphasized, and clawed at his hand that suddenly

loosened.

“No, Lexi,” he whispered. “I’ve never wanted you. Your rejection won’t do anything to me.” He meant his words as if he were protected by something I knew nothing about, but as our bond began to crumble away, I felt the fear on his side.

*The uncertainty my haunting words would bring to him and his pack.*

That’s what I wholeheartedly desired. For him to truly fear what would come thanks to Karma and our Goddess who never forgives the sinfully forsaken. If death was truly my portion, so be it.

*At least I’d know that for a damn second, I was feared.*

“**Now die,**” he whispered with as much power as he could - a second before our bond shattered.

*Then he let go.*

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Avery Stone is the new pen name of USA Today Bestselling Author, Avery Song.

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