

A
MC WEREWOLF
ROMANCE



ACHERON'S WOLF MOON

TIMBER COVE WOLVES MC BOOK 6

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CYNDI FARIA

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About the Author, Cyndi Faria](#)

ACHERON'S WOLF MOON

Timber Cove Wolves MC

Book 6

USA Today Bestselling Author

CYNDI FARIA

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CHAPTER 1



Eve Soteria

Sometimes, love shows up at the wrong time and there's no way to fix the clock. Or is there? The crunch of leaves outside my cabin is the first sound of the intruder. I'm a shifter. I can tell the difference between deer, bear, and the intruder's footsteps. Coastal deer are light-footed, bears plunder through the brush without a care of disrupting chirping crickets and foraging marsupials, but the snap of twigs from this particular two-legged creature could tear me apart if provoked.

I shove off my twisted bed sheet, brush strands of my black hair from my face, and slowly approach the darkened window from the corner. I'm not stupid. I'm not going to plaster my big, brown eyes to the glass for the shifter to see me noticing him, even if it's midnight. Because I'm unsure if I'm ready to acknowledge that Acheron Suda has been watching over me since I was kidnapped a year ago—maybe longer.

I don't dare draw attention to his behavior with the oblivious pack around us. Albeit deep in slumber. But still... In doing so, I'll have to admit this pulse of desire building within me is more than my hormones racing toward the precipice of my needing period. Even my wolf craves Acheron. She has since the first time we laid eyes on him.

But she's careful, hiding in the shadows, keeping her howls on the down-low so as not to draw attention to her desired mate. Doing so could gain the attention of the Shifter Alliance (SA), which states that no shifter can take a second mate in one lifetime, which is punishable by death. I can never be his. Linking up with Acheron could get us both killed.

Yet, I fear I may lose control. It's in my wolf-shifter nature to chase until I find answers. It won't be long before my urge to breed will force me to risk everything to be with him. I need to know why he stands outside my window, night after night. My wolf isn't so quick to question our packmaster, though.

Acheron is powerful. He's the Alpha of all Alphas within the Timber Cove wolf pack—Alpha of our MC. He's also forty years old, the same age as my father when he passed, and eighteen years older than me. He's taboo. Off-limits. A no-can-do in too many ways to count on one hand.

Which makes me want him even more. Like I said, timing is everything. I just have to find a way to make him mine without getting us both executed.

I fall away from the window and slide back under the covers. My heart thumps against my ribs, as wild to explode from my chest as my wolf is to sprint. Maybe that's the answer. Maybe I should go for a run. I would if I could. Ever since my kidnapping, I've been reclusive. Scared to leave the cabin. It could be that Acheron and I are fearful to admit that we have feelings for one another, so we keep our distance during the day, a thin pane of glass acting as our chaperone, and only dance with our feelings at night. Acheron is mysterious in that way.

I rise again and peer down, catching him looking up at me.

I cover my surprise giggle and sink again. They say the eyes are the window to one's soul. But with Acheron, one of his eyes is clouded a bluish gray. I've gazed into his good eye,

as dark as the blackest night. Soulless. Full of pain. Full of secrets. But I saw some flicker of his wolf peering back at me. I know he wants me.

Like I said, he's as guarded as they come. But I am too now. I'm no longer that aloof child who laughed too much or acted brazen as a young woman—behavior that draws the attention of others almost got me killed.

The *tink* on the window is unexpected. I lift, this time opening my window and looking down to the ground level. “Hey...”

“Your pulse changed. Are you hurt?”

Hurt? My core is on fire and touching myself only stokes the flames. “Bad dream.”

“Oh.” Acheron kicks at one of the stones lining the wall of azaleas.

I planted flowers around the cabin. They're in full bloom, pinks and whites showing off the pride I have in my home that Acheron insists I live in. It's these nuances I'm noticing in him that have me waiting for some kind of sign, other than his nightly stalking, to prove he wants me too.

We're not foolish. We're careful. In our case to the point that if I don't make the first move, I'll never know if he wants more from me. “Coming back from a run?”

“Just heading out.” Acheron combs thick fingers through fine strands of hair usually held back with a tie, and then shifts. His wolf is muscular and bold with black fur the color and shine of obsidian, and then he bolts.

I have only a moment to make the decision to follow him before he leaves me in the dust. My wolf is wound tight, fighting me to stay hidden, as if she's worried about Acheron's rejection. But I know the truth: she doesn't want us to be vulnerable. There are bad men in this world, worse

paranormals, not all of them shifters. But even if I fail and only make it out onto the porch, I have to test my fear.

I grit my teeth, forcing my shifter form as I open the door and shut it behind me.

The scent of the pine sap and ferns that grow close to the earth ride the sea breeze. It's all my wolf needs to take over my human form. I fall onto all fours, my arms and legs the last to take shape, shaking with each stride as we inch closer to the steps leading down to the forest.

We can do this. With a verbal shove off the porch, I leap into the air, landing on the soft soil that's drenched from the fog rolling inland from the Pacific Ocean. With my acute hearing, I locate Acheron's loping gait. He's heading west toward the sea.

In my shifter form, everything is simplified. My thoughts about the Shifter Alliance fade as much as the echo of my father telling me to choose a strong mate if I'm to reproduce children who will make it into adulthood, and to escape the she-wolf curse.

If I don't fall pregnant by my twenty-seventh year, I'll die. Breaking the curse is futile. Maybe chasing after Acheron, expecting him to tell me he wants *me* as his second romantic mate, is as fruitless. All these worries ebb as I sprint toward Acheron, but my desire for the man I hold dear never lessens.

I lift my tail and sink into a submissive pose when I catch his scent. He's close. Closer than he's ever been since he broke into the Craters of the Moon pack's house and rescued me a year ago. It's as if he's baiting me to follow him. Waiting in the shadows. I can still feel his arms around me, lifting me up, holding my human shape as if he were a movie-star hero embracing his long-lost lover.

I shake the thought and my furred ears shimmy. We are shifter wolves, and our lives revolve around horror stories

rather than fantasy romance. Lifting my front leg, I freeze when I hear his voice. He's not far from me, maybe twenty feet with the breeze from the incoming fog setting me upwind. It helps to carry his voice, but the words are garbled, perhaps laced with emotion.

I inch closer, placing each pad carefully across the damp forest floor. I'm an intruder in his world, our roles suddenly reversed. Where he could list reasons why he's checking on me, I'm only as relevant as a medic, and he looks to be physically unharmed.

I can't say as much for his heart. Or his soul.

The moss-covered trunk kings the forest. It's an old redwood, the girth nearly twenty feet in diameter, but even I can see the strain the tree is carrying, the way it's begun to lean, as if any day it will become one with the forest floor.

I blow a quiet breath and retreat, giving him time to observe the base of the tree he's having a conversation with. It's our shifter way, and I'm certain there at the base lies buried the family he lost. I back up slowly, careful my bushy tail doesn't knock over any loose branches that lay dried on the underbrush. "Choose happiness. Leave grief behind, Acheron, and live," I whisper, though it comes out somewhat high-pitched and garbled in my wolf form.

Chastising myself all the way to the edge of the bluff that lines the west side of the compound, I find a familiar place to ponder. I know pain. I know loss. Maybe not the loss of my mate, but the loss of my entire family.

The spot I found when I first came to Timber Cove when our Silver Bend pack was absorbed is well carved into the boulders at my feet, as if others before me came here in search of respite, or in my case, answers. It was here, after the first meeting with our new packmaster when I was eighteen, that I felt my body tremble with desire for Acheron Suda. Four years

ago. Not a look my way from him for anything more than necessary. Then the rescue changed everything.

And nothing.

Something darts past my peripheral. It's at least a hundred yards to my right, and I watch it fall into the crashing breakers below.

My heart lunges into my throat and adrenaline surges in my veins, sending me into action. I gallop down the bluff, weaving my way past exposed rocks, and land on four pads in the sand. Fine grains ooze through my paws as I race to the spot where Acheron went in the water. The chilled waves rush my furred legs, and in the distance, he battles the surf.

It's easier to swim in human form, so I shift and dive into the sea. Every stroke, every hard-earned foot I gain to reach him, I'm closing the distance. But to what? A death sentence should I find Acheron to be my soulmate and he mine. If the Shifter Alliance finds out we've taken each other as mates, we're as good as dead.

In the same way, if Acheron won't accept us as his second mate, I'll be crushed. All my human worries rush in, pummeling me and sending me under one crashing wave after another. But for Acheron, I'm willing to battle the hands of time.

CHAPTER 2



Acheron Suda

Loss is a living, breathing thing that chips away at our souls. I place my hands at the base of the redwood where I buried my wife and unborn child. The knot in my throat chokes me, but the pain in my chest is less than it was a decade ago. I wish it wasn't, but the fact remains. I'm alive. She is but a fading ghost. "Tasha, can you forgive me?"

The moss grows thick here. It pushes up between my fingers, as if shoving me upward and away, back to the living. It's easier coming here than it once was, but my guilt expands each time I visit. More so since I found Eve. "I didn't plan on having feelings for another shifter. I swear it on my life, Tasha. I planned on laying down here with you the day I die."

The fog grows thick. Thicker than any spot on my lands, and I realize I'm caught between two worlds. Rhododendron immortelles weigh heavily in pink blooms. Ferns cover the spot so well that only I know of the sacred monument. Someday, the roots of this tree will encase my body. Will encase me with my family.

But it's my soul I worry about. The connection to Tasha has been reduced with time.

The figure emerges, one I've seen many times before. She's dark-haired, green-eyed, her form as translucent as the

dreams we once had of living life together, of family. “Why do you haunt me, Tasha, when I can do nothing to resurrect you?”

“I am no longer of this world. You needn’t worry about me. But Eve needs you.”

“Needs me,” I scoff and lean against the trunk, the bark gouging into my arms. “We have too many forces against us.”

“It’s not these outer pressures that keep you from living, it’s your refusal of letting me go.”

I stare at the mirage. Tasha isn’t real. She’s only a figure of my tormented imagination and a creation of my own desperation to do the right thing. I pledged my soul to her. I can barely stomach considering if doing the right thing includes never returning here. If I embrace a second chance at love, what will happen to Tasha? What will happen to her ghost, our shared memories, her soul?

“Help!”

Eve’s voice slams into my head, jarring me out of my dreamscape, and Tasha fades from my sight, even as I claw at the space where she was standing.

I tip my head, listening, when I feel Eve’s plea a second time. I shouldn’t be hearing Eve in my head.

Only mated pairs have a telepathic connection.

My wolf unfurls, kicking me into gear, forcing me to act, urging me to leave this place.

“I won’t forget you, Tasha,” I murmur. “You are my moon...”

“Eve is your sun, your light. Save her so you both can live...” Tasha’s whispers are carried on the breeze.

I’m not ready to let go of my past, of Tasha and the family I once thought I’d have, but I push off the tree and sprint toward the bluff. To Eve.

CHAPTER 3



Eve

Life isn't fair. I've known that since I lost my parents. Every day is a struggle. At times, every second. But I'm alive, and I plan to make the most of my life. The unforgiving waves smash over my body, but I wrestle one after the other, arching my arms and pressing my cupped hands into the churning liquid. Being a shifter is rarely a win-win situation, even though the Timber Cove pack seems lucky, mated pairs popping up everywhere. I'm fighting for my survival every moment, and that includes the life of my packmaster. But I'm not stupid. There may be another one of my pack members around.

I lift my head and yell, "Help!"

Another wave hits me, pushing me under, forcing me to hold my breath until my lungs are near bursting. I hope someone heard me, because I have to stop Acheron from making a foolish choice, one he won't spring back from.

I make headway, ducking under the waves. I'm not the chosen medic for nothing. I'm a good swimmer, better than ninety percent of my pack. I spring upward, breaching the surf, and catching sight of the man. This time, I take a deep breath and dive under the relentless waves and torpedo my body through the dark water.

The grip on my arm comes from out of nowhere, and I'm pulled to the surface. "What the hell were you thinking?"

I gasp, drawing in a breath of salty air. I wipe a mass of drenched hair from my face, taking in Acheron's smirk and the shaking of his head. Clearly, he disapproves of my swimming abilities, but he appears bemused. That makes two of us.

Did I make a mistake? How is he here when he was just in front of me? While I'm trying to massage an answer, I come up with a doozy to get me out of the water quickly. Obviously, Acheron wasn't on a suicide mission. So, no need to draw attention to something that I apparently fabricated. "I thought I'd cool off. Go for a dip. You know..."

Nothing to see here. Just the idiotic young woman fumbling all over her crush while said crush hadn't just tried to end his life and is a perfectly competent swimmer. But how did he get to me so fast? How did he get behind me when he was in front of me by twenty feet minimum?

"No. I don't know. Do you have a death wish?"

His question stumps me as I find my footing and stand in knee-high water, flushed from embarrassment. I search the horizon where the sea meets the night, the moonlight cutting a pale-yellow swath in the murky boil. "Honestly, I saw you there on the bluff, and then you jumped. I was swimming out to rescue you, thinking you were committing suicide."

His face turns a shade of crimson I've never seen before.

"Fuck no," he growls, tightens his grip, and drags me to the shore. "Do I seem distraught?"

Well... "Maybe because of me at the moment, but no, not that I've noticed." *Not counting twenty minutes ago when I saw you at the gravesite.*

"Eve, if I had thoughts, which I don't, I'd seek help. I have responsibilities, including babysitting you, obviously."

My eyes sting, and not from the saltwater. I'm not a baby, and I'm tired of being seen as one. But Acheron is eighteen years my senior, so I guess he still sees me as a kid. Ugh.

But I also understand depression, as a medic, and the signs. It's not a stretch on my thinking that Acheron has been acting overprotectively with me, and I know he's feeling guilty about betraying his dead wife. I can smell his guilt pouring off him, and it leaves a sour taste on my tongue. "Well, *I* have a duty to the pack as well. If I think one of its members is in trouble, it's my job as a first responder to render aid."

"You could have drowned. You could have been eaten by a great white shark and we'd have never found you. What were you thinking, Eve?" He adds a string of curses.

I'm still stuck in my head, the two of us going in circles about who's rescuing whom. Strangely, my pulse isn't as affected by my closeness to Acheron as it is to the phantom I was chasing. Or the thoughts that raced through my head: Would he attempt suicide? Is the rift between his old life, one of pain and loss, guilt, and grief, guilting him from choosing a new path, one that could lead to happiness? But if I didn't see him... "If it wasn't you, then who was it?"

"Seal." Acheron clicks his tongue, punctuating the answer.

A seal? I thought Acheron was a *seal*? No. I check his hair, seeing that it's dry at the top except for wetness near his sideburns, which is possibly sweat. He definitely wasn't in the water. So, what did I see? Who did I see?

"Best you get home..." The muscle under his eye ticks.

I've noticed he has a tell when he's close to me. It's not the *seal* that's the elephant between us. It's the way he weaves, tilting toward me and leaning away. It's as if he's as conflicted as I am about what happened during the kidnapping and how to proceed with our shared attraction.

About touching me and getting too close. He feared for me to the point that rescuing me was personal. And that attachment hasn't lessened even as he is pushing me homeward.

I'm not scared of the truth. I've treated wounds that would make the strongest men faint or puke. And I'm bold enough, feeling as safe as I've ever felt, next to him.

I jam to a halt and spin to face him. "What's going on? You come to my cottage every night. Blame it on the moon, the call of the forest, peace when your job hands you anything but that. Acheron, I like you. I've liked you since the first day I saw you. But whatever happened to make you come for me when I was kidnapped, it changed things. I can feel it. I know you do, too."

He backs up, putting a good two feet between us. "You're imagining this. I'm looking out for you, as a responsible packmaster."

I can't deny that I'm growing feelings for him, and my wolf is aware that his wolf sees me. Not as a pack member, but as a mate. So why is he denying it?

The Shifter Alliance and a death sentence.

All right, there is that. But it's not like I've ever seen the SA once in my lifetime hunting for rule breakers of an archaic law. There are bigger world problems than who's mating and loving whom. "And I appreciate you watching over me. I feel safe with you."

His silence leads a tear to form at the corner of my eye. But I'm not weakened by it. I enter his space, taking his hand into mine. It's only with him that I feel strongest, where I feel the freest, where my anxiety doesn't threaten to send me running back into my cottage and locking myself behind a locked door. "You held me, not like I was a child or to comfort a victim when you rescued me. I smelled your fear of losing

me when I've never known your emotions to leak through your walls. Acheron, you want me. I know it's messy. But if there's hope, there's a way—"

"Stop yourself." He firmly holds my shoulders and puts me within arm's reach. "I don't want you getting your hopes up. I was caught up in the moment of finding you alive and unharmed. That was all. It's been a year, and my panic has faded. As Alpha of this pack, I check on you in the same way I check on all pack members during my nightly runs. I pause, I listen, then I'm off to do my next check."

His lie bleeds out of him, his under-eye skin skipping to a rhythmic beat.

I smell the coverup like an oozing abscess from an infected wound. He's protective of his pack, of his reasoning for doing anything he does, including business, inside and out of the compound, but even more so in his personal life.

Perhaps his past, guarding the grave in hopes his wife and newborn will reanimate, is what's holding him back.

I'll never replace his true mate, his first love, a family he'd thought he'd have but lost. Worse, the more time I spend with him, the more it feels like our paths are twined. There will never be an *us* because Acheron isn't open to change. But how can I move on to find a suitable shifter when all I crave is the man standing before me. All I crave is for *him* to love me.

Tears fall from my eyes. *Traitors*. He knows what admitting his feelings for me will cost him. I wish I was as cautious of consequences. "You're not being true to yourself. I understand why. You've had a mate who you loved dearly. I can't replace her. I don't want to. I wouldn't expect you to ever stop loving her or grieving for your loss. But life or love isn't a choice, not for me. I want both, and I want that with you."

“That’s bullshit,” he snaps. “You deserve your *own* mate, a *true* mate, one that doesn’t include complications. I don’t plan on having a three-way when it comes to my heart.”

“So, there’s no chance for us?” I stutter and my voice hitches.

“No.” He turns, giving me his wide back. “You know why I sit up in that house all alone? It’s because the demons come at me at night. I’m not running laps around the compound for fitness. I’m running from the shit that’s stuck in my head. Two deaths I couldn’t stop. So no. I won’t allow you to ruin your life by taking you as a mate. It’s my job to *find* you a mate, not to *be* one.”

I glance back out to sea, averting his gaze when he faces me again. I don’t want to admit that my wolf is in quiet agreement, even if she sees him as a worthy mate. It would be easier accepting Acheron’s way than to fight for him. Because it’s hard to see my future. I’m pining for and channeling all my energy into a man who will never truly be mine. Not one hundred percent.

But in my heart, in my soul, there will never be a way to quit Acheron.

I hunger for the feelings I’m absorbing through Acheron’s touch when he reaches out to me, placing his hand on my arm. My wolf craves his brutal honesty and strength, his prowess and power. His dominance over me. But still I push. I can’t help but test our bond. “Don’t you believe in second chances? Don’t you deserve to be happy? Wouldn’t someone who loves you through eternity want to see you happy in life?”

His frown cuts a hard line on his forehead. “No. I don’t deserve anything but pain. Certainly not your light. I won’t shadow your goodness and all you have to give in the world. Get back to your cabin. I’m calling a meeting in the morning. You’ll need to be well rested and presentable.”

His posture as he walks away is as ice cold as the chill I feel when I stroll the lonely path leading to my cottage. The ferns brushing my leg sprinkle me with liquid fog. The treetops are cloaked in cloudy plumes, moisture dripping from their needled fingers, as if crying for my loss. Our loss, if we don't destroy old rulings.

The surf booms in the distance, a harsh reminder that my time to find a mate is narrowing and an ever-growing sign that danger is approaching. Sooner or later, I'll have to make a choice to find a mate to escape the curse, as unfair as that sounds to all involved.

Or break all the rules and tell Acheron I'm in love with him.

CHAPTER 4



Acheron

Only an idiot looks for a scapegoat when he's to blame. Call it temporary insanity as I shake off my boots and kick the hunk of leather across the room. What the hell is wrong with me? I'm distracted by Eve and her scent, her luminous skin, those legs-for-days, and her wolf who's tempting me to mate with her, so much so that I failed to sense a possible intruder. But worse, Eve's soul calls to mine, and I'm inches from answering with a big, fat *Yes, I'm falling for you and hating myself at the same time.*

See? Idiot.

I can't tell her how I'm feeling, how I'm split. I can't be the one to break her heart. Only maybe I already have by my inaction.

Which brings me to the object in the water. I didn't get a good look at it. It could have been a seal. But now that I'm home, I need to alert security to confirm. Because in my gut, I feel a sinister vibe weighing in the air.

Okay. It's probably my bad attitude. Regret. Self-loathing for failing my dead wife, and Eve's dreams.

But what if it's more? As a shifter, I pick up the tiniest fluctuations in mood, and I can't ignore feeling something

sinister brewing. I shoot off a text to Maxon, telling him to have his guards scout the property for intruders.

Which doesn't ease my rutting hormones one iota. The hint of Eve's pheromones slathered all over my skin are driving me mad. No amount of pulling at my hair lessens my urge to make her mine, that's for damn sure.

But a second mate can't be in the cards for me. At least, I never believed I'd get a shot at redemption by saving Eve from the Craters of the Moon pack.

I should have walked away from her as soon as she was safe.

Yeah right.

My hands on her body, lifting her off that grimy wooden floor, roaches scurrying back to their hidey-holes... Her arms clutching my neck and telling me I was her hero... She might have only been held hostage for a few hours, but my soul quaked the moment I found her and held her close. I might have promised her the world at that moment. I certainly remember promising her no harm would ever come to her, and that I'd never let anyone hurt her again.

Still, I caution myself not to act on these feelings. I can't help but continue to think I'm betraying the ghost of my wife—the woman I pledged my undying love to and bonded with for life—even though Tasha seemed to tell me otherwise.

Tasha's been dead as long as Eve's been alive.

Another concern. I'm nearly twice Eve's age.

Maybe she's Tasha incarnate. Born the day my wife died.

Another twist of fucked-up fate. Reincarnation. I don't believe in that shit.

I kick the second boot again for good measure, and it crashes into the corner of the glass coffee table, obliterating

the pane.

It's a simile for what will happen to me should the Shifter Alliance find out I've taken a second mate when there are so many shifters who'll never find their true love. Why should I get a second chance? I found love. I lost it. Part of being a shifter. Pain. Pain. Pain.

I'm not ignorant of the she-wolf curse either. Who knows if I'm still virile? My own child failed to make it into the world, causing my wife to die in the birthing process. If I can't get Eve pregnant, she's as good as dead because the she-wolf curse will take her.

The fuck if I want another death on my hands when I can prevent it. I'm not that selfish.

I get to cleaning up the mess I made when there's pounding on my door.

What the hell is going on? Then I remember the text I sent. See? Eve is a *distraction*.

I can smell Maxon a second before I open the door, his spiced cologne wafting into the foyer. He's bulked up, his muscles glistening under the moonlight, proving he's recently shifted back into his human form. "That was quick," I say.

"We need to talk about this intruder." He looks surprised as he enters, taking in the shattered glass swept into a tidy pile. "Was the vampire here?"

I lift my brow. A vamp? Makes sense with the speed and breath-holding capabilities. I scratch my chin. "Eve and I were out on the bluff when we spotted something in the water. I wasn't sure what I saw."

Maxon crooks a brow and crosses his arms, looking at me up and down, seeing that I'm still dripping sea water. "You and Eve. On the bluff? Alone, huh?"

Not counting the trespasser. But I don't owe Maxon an explanation of why I'm soaking wet or about my private affairs.

I cringe at the word *affair* and the stab of betrayal that punches me in the gut. "About this trespasser. You confirm it was a vamp?"

"Pretty sure. Going to scout the tunnels next." He jabs a thumb over his shoulder. "But you still haven't answered my question about Eve. Or what happened here."

A shiver darts through me. Eve was so close to danger. Too damn close. The table is another casualty of my lust.

I tuck my hands behind me to keep Maxon from seeing them shake. It's not my *alone* time with her that has me worried, or Maxon finding out that I've been stalking the woman for the past year or playing hero. I've gone so far as to consider poking out my good eye, so I can't see her beauty and gentle soul. The fact is, I can't be with her twenty-four-seven, and she's driving me mad when I'm away. What if she falls into the wrong hands again, and this time I can't protect her?

"I can see by your lack of a response that you have more than platonic feelings for Eve. It's not a secret. Your breeding scent is ripe, my friend. Does Eve know your intentions?"

I look for something else to kick, but the foyer is missing my boots, and I'm not about to prove that I'm an idiot by breaking my toes on the marble column.

My everyday tasks are consumed with thoughts of Eve. Something I can't allow. "Intentions? My plan is to *find* Eve a mate. That's my duty as her packmaster, and I told her so."

I can't deny my feelings for her. Or hers for me. I wish I could. But if a vampire is skirting our property, I need to find out why. Why would a vamp show up here in Timber Cove? The last vampire had fooled just about everyone by playing a

human sheriff. Was he leading a coven we didn't know about that's returned to avenge the ex-sheriff somehow?

"How'd she take it?" Maxon prods.

I hurt her. I could see the pools filling in her eyes. "Let me worry about Eve. You find out who this trespasser is and if there are more vamps. Have a couple of your betas ride out to the shifter bar on the edge of town, the one Tavin used to populate. See if you can gather any intel. If you find a vamp in the tunnels, bring it to me alive. I want to question it."

"Will do. But back to Eve. You'll never be happy if you don't forgive yourself for what happened to Tasha. It wasn't your fault she died. It was nature. Let go of the past, move on to be with the woman you have feelings for while you have time. If there's hope, love will find a way."

Choose happiness. Leave grief behind and live...blah, blah, blah.

As if I hadn't heard similar words whispered in the wind not more than an hour ago, I grumble my displeasure. I swear Tasha's ghost spoke to me from beyond the grave, telling me to choose Eve, who'll shed light on my grumpy ass. "I had hope with Tasha. I'm not repeating that shit show. I don't think I'd survive a second loss. Besides, I have bigger problems."

"I'll report back when I know more." Maxon takes off, a slow jog turning into a sprint.

I close and lock the door, walling myself up in this house of misery. My own private hell. The only thing between me and a second shot at love is the damage control, both from the Shifter Alliance, if they should find out I've taken a second mate, and mine and Eve's shared history. Tasha's ghost will tear us apart because I'm not interested in a ménage à trois with a dead woman.

Nor am I interested in being Eve's hero, even if she thinks I'm hers and I've jumped into that role a few times. As her packmaster, I vow to *find* her a mate, not be hers, like I told Maxon.

I check the time on my cell phone, noting it's nearly four a.m. It may be wee hours of the morning, but I have one particular unmated male in mind that would be a good match for Eve.

She met Ben Smultron, the new Craters of the Moon packmaster's brother last year. Ben has Alpha bloodlines and my hard-earned respect. He has every right to form his own pack far away from Northern California.

Which would be the best for me—he could take Eve far from Timber Cove. Far from this vampire concern. Far from my second chance of agonizing heartache.

As soon as the thought sets, I pick up my cell and draft a text to Cam, the Crater packmaster, asking him if I can *borrow* his second. I explain that I have a proposition for his bachelor brother and need him in Timber Cove fourteen hours from now. It's a push, but if I hold the meeting late this afternoon, I can be done with this torment by dinner. The sooner Ben arrives, the sooner I can set my match-making plan in motion.

The floor trembles underfoot, and I hit send. I'm thinking the off-balance feeling I'm experiencing is me and my doubts that Eve will willingly go with her assigned mate. But the house continues to sway and the chandelier swings above my head, testing the medallion molding and sending a web of cracks across the ceiling.

Damn San Andreas fault reminding me how small I am in this world. It's commonplace, tiny tremors alerting me that the earth's crust is shifting in response to changes in force. But this quake is on an epic scale.

Something below me snaps, as if my foundation high up on the hill is about to collapse.

A second later, the floor falls from beneath me, and Tasha's portrait over my mantle hangs precariously by a weakened nail. A gaping hole in my living room appears, swallowing my sectional sofa and my entire rocked fireplace, including that big-ass trophy buck that died of natural causes and I had taxidermied last summer to preserve his longevity and dominance.

I crouch, sprout claws, and grip the wood flooring that splinters in my hold. Life isn't a given. It can be snatched away in a moment. Certainly, the earthquake reminds me that I have no power when it comes to my fate. Time isn't on my side when it comes to love, as I'm thinking the earth is taking me up on my promise to become one with my deceased family.

Only, as I glance down at the splinters and molten rock eating my infrastructure, I don't want to die. I want to live. I want to feel something other than pain.

My home's footing reaches clear to bedrock, and the structure has stood test after test each time an earthquake has hit. But this shaking is something right out of some mythological realm. What the hell is happening? Is my pack okay? Is Eve?

My belly swims from motion sickness, and I do the unthinkable. I reach out with my mind and feel for Eve, her lifeforce.

There. Oh my God, she's okay. She's in her bed. Not sleeping. Crying, but at least she's alive. How could I have hurt her the way I did.

It's you that's hurting. Let go and live.

Let go? I'm clutching one of the pillars for dear life. If I let go, I'll fall.

The rocking and rolling continues, as if the earth is set on expelling something rancid from its belly.

I release my grip on the column and push away my fears. With a shove off the floor, I leap to the foyer, unlocking and then yanking open the front door to peer down at my pack's homes nestled in the valley. To Eve. To the one who's woken my heart.

I may be my pack's master, their leader on the hilltop, but to Eve, if given a second chance, I want to be her hero. Or at least try. Which means I can't show my fear as I seek to protect her, even as the earth threatens to eat me alive. Under my breath, I pray: Let me be her hero one more time.

CHAPTER 5



Eve

Once you make a decision, the universe conspires to make it happen. That's what my mother used to tell me, but I'm not so sure. I hope the universe hears my wishes as I slip under the covers and settle into bed, wiping the last of my tears. I want to be mated to Acheron. I want to have his children and support him. I want us to be happy. I want to prove to him that love is waiting for both of us if we believe.

I'm not wrong for wanting my fairytale to come true.

Tick, Tick, Tick.

The second hand on the wall clock trudges on in its mission to prove a future exists. I have the same uphill climb. I have a decision to make, and my very existence depends on it.

I can keep chasing Acheron, the man I'm falling in love with, believing he'll see me before it's too late. Before the curse decides for me that I'll never become a mom and instead death awaits me.

I can obey Acheron and accept this mate he's providing me with. Acheron cares for me, I know that much. He's not handing me over to some Alpha-hole or some crusty brute. He'll find the perfect mate for me. I trust him, after all, with my soul.

My heart? Maybe that's where I'm pushing it. If he assigns me to a mate, my heart will break from his rejection, consequences be damned.

Or I can run. I can put distance between Timber Cove and all I've come to love.

Pepper did it. She's my best friend, and she's happily mated and with a child. I could go live with her pack. There's bound to be some worthy males in her group to choose from. Ben Smultron comes to mind. But I've digressed.

I have choices I must make.

Acheron's your true mate. Love has no time limit...

My wolf isn't so quick to make decisions tonight.

So, I try the unthinkable. I send out telepathic feelers to my true mate, hoping Acheron answers. I haven't done it before, but if he exists in the world, I should be able to find him, right?

If I'm to become Acheron's mate, I'd have the ability to connect with him, wouldn't I?

Of course, I'm a novice at this technique. But I will give it my best try. I close my eyes, project my mind, feeling a tingle set up at the top of my head, smack dab in my parietal lobe.

I fluff my pillow, pull the covers over my shoulders, and roll onto my side, getting nice and comfy. My mate is out there. The universe has conspired to make it happen. I send out my signature mating vibes as if my life depends on it, which it does, and I test one degree of direction at a time...

CHAPTER 6



Acheron

“Acheron. Acheron. Acheron.”

Eve’s melodic voice slams into my head like a semi-truck, and I stumble backward, nearly falling into the gaping hole in my living room. I need to be careful what I wish for, because the only hero I need to be right now is my own. I don’t have time to consider how Eve is connecting with me when my house is set to go up in flames. Considering my dangerous predicament, the last thing I’m doing is answering her. I don’t want her rushing up here to find a horror scene right out of *The Hole* and our worst nightmares crawling out of this misty pit.

I slam up my mental walls, shutting her out before she can make contact and feeling like an asshole for doing so. But her safety takes precedence. I peer closer to the homes at the base of the hill, taking a solid step toward Eve’s cottage, when I notice the strangest thing is happening.

Or rather not happening.

The trees aren’t uprooted or shaking their canopies. The houses haven’t been reduced to tinder. It’s as if I’m locked in some kind of nightmare that feels like I’m being sucked into the bowels of hell and my pack is no worse for wear.

It’s as if this test of strength and mind is a challenge to save myself.

Which has me considering... How do I escape this purgatory? I don't smell sulfur to alert me to approaching demons. The ground, though it's trembling violently, only appears to shake the hilltop this house is perched on, ruling out the shifting of the San Andreas fault.

I backtrack, pleased that I'm barefoot and able to elongate my nails to pierce the flooring and keep me locked to this side of whatever realm has breached my living room.

My heart is jack-rabbiting against my ribcage, and my throat dries from fear. I catch my reflection in a plate-sized shard of the mirror that broke away when the open pit ate my hearth.

My good eye is bugged out of my face, and my blind eye has caught the reflection of the red embers glowing from the cavernous hole.

Though it could be Eve's breach that's sent me into a tailspin.

I think for a moment I must have dozed off. Yeah, that's it. Eve isn't my mate, so she hasn't synced with my mind. But this terror feels all too real. As if on cue, my wolf pushes his claws out my fingertips, taking over. I use the index nail to rake a red line down my arm, causing a bloody trail surely painful enough to wake me.

Nothing happens. I don't spring from a deep sleep and wake up sweating and panicked, clutching my sheets or seeking shelter under my bed, like I did when I was a kid.

The scent of pungent tar and smoke mixed with pepper and licorice fills the air.

I cover my mouth and nose. It's a scent I've smelled brewing in one of those psychic shops that sells incense and crystals in one of the hippy, coastal towns nearby. But the

heaviness of the air is nothing compared to the opposing male figure who rises from the depths.

My breath seizes at the sight of the male. What the hell is happening? The man, if I can call him a man, rises from the smoldering earth. He slicks back strands of black locks that have fallen into his dark eyes.

He's not a demon. No, he's something different altogether. He's taller than I am by eight inches, putting him nearly seven feet tall. Imposing with his broad shoulders. But there's a dash of pain that flashes across his face when our eyes meet.

He's not here for me—though he's come for answers *from* me. I've seen myself in the mirror as I hunted for Eve. His face holds a look of pain, loss, and demonic anger when he spots Tasha's portrait, but I question the beast, "Who the fuck are you? And who have you come for?"

"Where is Aradia?" His booming voice rattles the sheetrock, which falls off the walls.

Wrong question to ask, I guess. He doesn't take time to hear me answer as he lands on my floor, the pit separating us by ten feet. He buckles his knees, as if he's going to lurch across the expanse and rip me apart in hopes of finding Aradia.

Franky, I have no idea who this *Aradia* is. We've never been attacked from the inside out. Nothing since that one time when a demon found its way inside the caverns.

"Where is she?" The beast sails toward me.

I free my wolf, throwing caution out the door, to protect my unsuspecting pack. I launch, colliding into the intruder midway over the hellish hole in my ruined substructure.

The two of us should fall into the earth's gaping mouth, but instead, the man's strength blasts me in the opposite

direction, knocking me back into the foyer's marble column, landing me in a heap of fur and claws.

I shake my head, and my mane wobbles. I crawl to all fours, but check behind me, spying Eve's cottage at the base of the hill. *Eve*. Let her escape this threat, because I doubt I'll survive this continued beating. The intruder is just that strong.

I curl my lips over my canines, unwilling to go down easily, warning the intruder. I snarl, "What do you want?"

His shadow rolls over me. "Aradia. Tell me where she is, and I will let you live."

As if he's decided my fate, I growl low in my throat, tasting iron coating my tongue. I must have bitten it when I went flying. But I've bled before.

I reduce my wolf, showing him my control over my beast. My dominance isn't something I can use and win over this god-like creature. His power isn't human or shifter. It's nothing like I've ever seen. "I don't know anyone named Aradia in my pack. But I did see an intruder on my property not more than a few hours ago. A vampire."

The beast of a man hardens as if he's turned to stone.

I think about calling in my pack with a bark, but I don't want them involved in what looks like an otherworldly presence. I'm their wall of defense, and there's a suspected vampire on the loose. Maybe this person can help me. A win-win. An enemy of my enemy could be an ally.

I move one paw over the other to put me on the ready should he attack again. After another few seconds, the silence is deafening. "Listen. I've got a canine nose and can smell a mile away. If she's close, I can help track her. All I need is a description of her scent, and I'm on it."

He bends his knees, looking like he's ready to pounce.

I push out my wolf, matching his beastly qualities, rising on my hind legs and putting my face in line with his neck. Shit, he's just that tall. Power radiates off him in waves. *Eve*. I cling to my courage. "I'm not going down easy, if it's a fight you want."

"Your protectiveness over your mate impresses me. I can see it every time you check the cottage at the foot of your mountain." He laughs, the sound shaking the chandelier that's still swinging above his head, as if he controls the elements.

Maybe he does.

"Your female is Aradia's age." He pivots and points to Tasha's painting. "This is the woman I'm looking for. She belongs to me."

I gulp back my answer, and I have the sense to keep my mouth shut about Eve and our relationship. The sooner I get this guy to leave, the sooner I can focus on fortifying the walls around the compound, and potentially the surfaces. But first I need to clear up a misunderstanding. "The woman in the painting was my mate, but she died nearly two decades ago. She is not who you're looking for, which means Aradia's still out there."

He groans, clutches his fist, and his eyes turn to fire.

Fuck me. I have to get Eve out of her, and find someone to take her far away.

But that's where I waffle. There is no way Eve is leaving me or my sight. I couldn't stand it.

Unfortunately, I have no time to call Cam and tell him I changed my mind about Ben. Perhaps he *should* come, though. Something is terribly wrong in Timber Cove if this being is searching for a dead woman. Believe me, I've tried hard to resurrect Tasha, but she is gone.

Lava burps, sending a ribbon of black smoke into my living room.

In all my life and learned history, the only things that exploded from the ground are what spewed from ancient volcanoes, like Mt. Shasta, Medicine Lake, and Mt. Lassen—lava and ash. I can't have this male destroying our lands, let alone me and my pack. "Then let me help you find her. Tell me what I need to do."

The sooner the better so I can get back to pack problems, my grief and pain. The logistics regarding Eve's safety.

The man steps forward, his mannerisms softening only enough that my wolf picks up on the deflating threat.

"I'm Hades, Äides the Unseen, God of the Underworld, Pluton, the Giver of Wealth."

I take a moment to absorb what I'm looking at, this Giver of Wealth as he calls himself. *More like the Giver of Wrath.* For a god, he seems powerless in his search for this woman.

Maybe here on earth his powers are reduced... Which I can use to my advantage and pocket for later. "Hades. I'm Acheron, Packmaster and Alpha of the Timber Cove Wolves."

He scoffs, looking as unimpressed as a squirrel with an empty peanut shell. But I'll take it. At least he's not punishing my body and destroying my home. "Where did you see her last?"

"The past is not important. What matters in now. Take me to your caverns. There is something I need to show you."

I shake my head, allowing my human shape to appear fully. I'm more vulnerable in this form, but I get the feeling if the god of the underworld wanted me dead, I'd *be* dead. I hike up my briefs, thankful they accompany my shifting and have stayed in place. No use feeling even more vulnerable. "Let me get the door."

* * *

Acheron

Every hero wannabe must pass through a ring of fire, I just hope my journey isn't literal. So far, it hasn't taken Hades and me long to enter the cavern at the edge of the bluff. The tunnel is musty at best. The humidity is near ninety percent, making the air heavy but not difficult to breathe. I can barely make out the overarching walls in the darkness, but my wolf eyes aid my view. Or rather the tapetum lucidum portion of my eye that transmits light to my brain. "How much deeper?"

Hades beams dark eyes at me. "You're the one with the snout. You tell me, wolfman."

His harsh manner evokes a growl from me. But I know irritation and what it feels like when you're searching for your mate. I inhale, looking for the human scent of Aradia, but all I register is the mustiness of the cavern and the sweet scent of naturally occurring sulfur gasses.

The farther we travel in silence, the more I consider the vampire and his intentions. Most trespassers are humans. They enter our lands at low-tide, ignorant of the potential danger that awaits them should they cross one of my guards when the high-tide pushes them across our boundaries. But the vampire seemed aware of our numbers, or at least carried the intelligence to flee. "We had a suspected vampire on our property. It swam out to sea effortlessly. If Aradia is human, we won't mistake her for a threat."

His thunderous stride grinds pebbles into the sand. "She isn't a threat to your kind. She's nothing more than a human now. Vulnerable as you are. And she is mine."

Mine. I've heard that about a million times from mated pairs, the males in particular. It's what I felt for Eve when I lost her, even as I fought my feelings for her. *Mine.* Somehow, someday, I'll figure out how to survive without her. It's a promise I make to myself.

A screech as loud as a wild puma hits my ears.

I lunge into a protective crouch, shoving Hades behind. "Vampire."

His hand on my shoulder brings me around just as Maxon and Tavin appear, both struggling to hold the squirming, seething vampire in chains.

"Found it about a mile in, but he's not talking." Maxon gives him a shake.

My second isn't addressing me. Not exactly. He's sizing up the man beside me, gauging how to proceed. I can see his mind processing: Shift or stay human. Would it matter?

"This is Hades. He's come looking for a woman—Aradia."

The vampire perks up, his tongue whipping across his blood-tinged fangs. "She tastes like shadows in the water, melancholy rose and black currants..."

Hades rushes the vampire, jerks him from Maxon and Tavin's holds, and lifts the flailing creature above his head. "Where is she? Where is Aradia?"

His booming voice shudders across my skin and the shaft's walls. Rocks and sand crumble at our feet, and I approach Hades with caution. I can't have him, someone whom I assume is an immortal with the ability to walk through solid rock without a scratch, send tons of soil to crush me and my pack. "You'll be hard-pressed to find Aradia if we're dead."

"Vampire, tell us how to find her, and we'll let you live another day," Hades growls.

His fury matches mine. I extend my telepathic connection again, finding Eve asleep this time. I ramp up my interrogation methods. “Pull out his teeth, then we won’t misunderstand his slurs through his fangs.”

The vamp hisses and chomps at the air. “A vampire and demon war is upon you. The blood of virgins will be spilled.”

The blood of virgins will be spilled. The words circle my mind and my pulse hammers in my veins. There is a vampire-demon war heading our way, fueled by the blood of virgins. It sounds like something right out of a gothic horror film.

Only this is real life. “Hades?”

“Where is she?” Hades roars and his eyes turn to fire.

“I’ll never tell you.” The vampire spits.

Hades squeezes and his arm turns molten. The creature jerks into a spell of manic fits, biting the air until it melts before our eyes, leaving us no closer to information or finding Aradia than we were a moment ago.

While I stare at the liquified vampire, Hades’ hands still dripping with the tarry substance, the chains that once bound him coiled at our feet, the god descends into the ground, leaving a small hole that fills itself in with grains of sand until nothing remains except a divot,

“Who was that?”

“What was that?”

“Who is Aradia?”

“What does this mean for our pack?”

But even as Maxon and Tavin plaster me with questions, I’m focused on one thing: I know the truth about Eve. She may present as flirty and sexually independent—she’d been Pepper’s best friend, the two having partied together as they sought out a good time with both human and shifter males. But

unlike Pepper, who'd experimented with her carnal desires before she took her husband, Eve has saved herself for her future mate.

She's saved herself for me.

But how can I protect her from a distance, from a war, from vampires who hunger for her virgin blood, when not even a god can keep his woman safe?

Unless I do the unthinkable. Unless I make her mine.

CHAPTER 7



Eve

The knock on the door mid-morning pulls me from getting dressed. To be honest, after a restless sleep, I'm barely clear-headed when I open the door to find Acheron. My heart sinks. This can't be good. He's serious about sending me away, and I don't want to go. I'm not ready to say goodbye to all I love about Timber Cove, and that includes him. "Can you give me a week? Just a little longer?"

Acheron folds his arms and takes up his natural dominating pose. "I'm moving in with you."

I can't have heard him right. I rub my eyes and take another look.

Sure enough, he's still here and looking just as set in his proclamation now that I've noticed a bag at his feet. But what changed his mind?

I have a feeling the path I've etched for a miracle to walk into my life is standing at my door. For a millisecond last night, I swore I connected with Acheron. Still, I cough in surprise, nearly choking on my spit. I scrutinize the man, thinking he must have some kind of brain injury. He doesn't look injured though, nothing obvious. He's not bleeding, nor does he have any signs of swelling on his skull, like he cracked his melon on a low-hanging branch on his way over to my cottage. "Uhm, say what?"

“As a precaution, I’m staying with you until we learn more about the intruder.”

Intruder. I tap my cheek. It wasn’t a seal. This gives me some feeling of validation. But why move in with me unless he wants more?

I narrow my gaze and tread lightly. He’s my packmaster, the one person in this world I can’t say no to. Even if he shot me down about our relationship. “So where are you planning on sleeping in my one-bedroom home? In my queen bed with me? Will the pack see you coming and going? Or is this strictly business?”

His face flushes slightly along his cheeks as he steps closer, putting his mouth so close to mine that I think he’s going to kiss me. My wolf picks up on his racing pulse. Or is it mine?

“There’s been a new development. I’ll announce it at the meeting, but, Eve, I promised you I’d protect you, and that’s what I’m going to do.”

I blink in confusion. He told me to dress up. I expected him to give me away to some assigned mate. His further inspection of me isn’t fatherly though. Not exactly. I’m wearing a black denim skirt that shows off my legs, a crop top in black and white, and a red sweater that shows I’m fun and flirty, but stylish. My black, lace up, high-heeled boots complete the edgy look. “Is there something wrong with my outfit?”

“You need to change into pants and riding boots.”

What? Is he sending me away so soon? Didn’t he just say he’s moving in with me? Or is he so concerned about this meeting that he’s being his overprotective self? “Are you playing my father now?”

He grabs my arm and ushers me inside, adding a growl. He practically tears apart my closet, finding blue jean pants and the boots I wear to ride my motorcycle. He shoves me into the bathroom to change. I get him being the all-mighty packmaster, but this is a side of him I don't like or need. Either tell me you want me or leave me alone to find someone who does. Geesh.

He must be satisfied when I emerge, changed. "Better, your highness?"

"Yes. Let's go." He marches toward the door, throwing it open.

I stop him by darting in front of him. He's giving me mixed signals tenfold, considering he sent me packing less than twenty-four hours ago, and now I smell his mating hormones as if he's showered in the stuff.

Why is he torturing himself if he wants me so badly? Let's fuck already and launch this mated-pair relationship, SA be damned. I may be holding on to my V-card, but lately, the thing feels like a ball and chain. I'm ready to be with my mate in all ways. We'll deal with the repercussions should they ever present themselves.

Plus, there exists a multitude of trained guards to watch over our pack. If he wants me to have protection or dress a certain way, all he has to do is assign someone to assist me or fight alongside me while I protect myself.

Oh, I forgot about him moving in with me. Ugh. "Why are you really here?"

He glances behind him, staring up at his mansion through the open door. "Like I said, there's been a new development, and my house needs work because of it."

I pinch my eyes. "Work? Like contractors and construction?"

“Construction, etcetera.”

It’s the etcetera that gets me. Since when does Acheron hire *contractors*? There is no way Acheron is allowing human contractors inside the compound. At least, I’ve never seen anyone else but his guards working on fences and mending porches and roofs. Our compound housing is simple ranch-style homes and cottages like mine in the center, nestled under the hilltop his home sits on. The cottages are used for females during their needing period. Since my periods fluctuate wildly, Acheron has insisted that I stay close to him.

Everything he’s done has brought us closer.

Except his plan to find me a mate.

I sigh. “Let’s get this over with. Who is the mate you’ve chosen for me, and obviously want to play chaperone while we get acquainted? Can I at least get a name before you hand me over in front of the pack?”

He checks behind him when he hears the engine of a motorcycle.

That makes two of us, because it’s not the engine I remember, it’s the man. Ben Smultron dismounts. He’s wearing black leather and looking about as hot as a shifter can. But my wolf hides her face, and I’m in agreement. I don’t want Acheron to see my face flush and think I’m attracted to Ben. He’s amazing and sweet, but he’s not Acheron. Grrr. Can you blame me for being angry that he’s removing my choices? “Don’t tell me you plan to wed me off to Ben. Please. Anyone but him.”

“What’s wrong with Ben? He’s the son of an Alpha—”

I throw up my hand. “Ben is great, he’s just not for me. He’s not you. But if you force our pairing, I’ll go. I’ll go if you tell me you *don’t* love me. That you don’t see a hint of a future with me.”

I can tell by the way he's looking at me that he's making excuses to get closer, but there are too many obstacles in our way. Specifically, SA laws, this new development he's mentioned twice, now Ben, and his past. "Can't you just tell me that you want me the way I want you? Tell me so I can settle my heart?"

He briefly glances across the forested landscape, spotting a group moving toward the meeting place. He raises a hand to my face, settling it on my cheek. "What I want doesn't matter when safety is top priority."

I'm top priority. I can see it in his eyes that he's talking about me. The pack is in there somewhere, but the way he glides his thumb across my cheek has to mean more. Doesn't it?

Why can't he just come on out and tell me that I'm important, that he fears for my safety, that whatever has happened to his home is somehow connected with this urgent meeting, and he's stepping in the direction of happiness.

"We should get going." He drops his hand and ushers me toward the others.

We make our way to the open-air seating area in the middle of the compound that's larger than his backyard, which is necessary because the meeting includes the entire pack hearing some important announcement. I have a moment where I glance over my shoulder, spotting his hilltop home, and yearn for more. At the least, I want the truth before he gives me away. "Is it Ben?"

He makes a throaty sound and pulls me to a stop.

His hand is warm, strong, and it lingers on my arm. This is the man I'm falling for. He's tender with me in ways I've never known. My face is so close to his chest that I smell his aftershave or deodorant. The spiced sandalwood scent pulls a long shiver from me.

“It’s not Ben. My focus has shifted. We have a vampire problem. That’s all I can tell you until I know more.”

The hairs at the back of my neck stand to attention and I inch closer to Acheron. The sun is on its descent with a few hours of daylight left. Vamps won’t show themselves. But when night falls, it could be a different story.

Obviously, his house needing repairs is some fabrication of the truth. Acheron doesn’t want me to be alone at night. He can easily enter my cottage without drawing attention. But if I enter his home, trudging up the incline in my jammies, others will take notice. Someone is always watching the Alpha, and not all who secretly inspire to replace him originate from our pack. Or even shifters, for that matter. I have a fleeting thought that he’s staying with me to ensure that Ben doesn’t get his chance to announce his intentions. Mmm... “This seal was a vampire.”

He nods. “We believe so.”

We? “Who else knows? What threat was made against our pack that couldn’t be handled by the guards? Unless... Was there more than one? Were we threatened?”

“Maxon and Tavin.” He blows his breath. “They found one lurking in the tunnels. Before it died, it threatened to—shit. It’s looking for virgin blood to fuel some kind of vampire-demon war. I won’t leave you alone.”

Virgin blood. I can’t screw my Alpha soon enough. “You’re moving in... As my boyfriend?”

The pain that flashes behind his eyes hurts my heart. I’m pushing him, but I watch him retreating every time I force the subject. I never want to live a lie, which is pretending that my attachment to Acheron and his wolf isn’t soul deep. “Let’s do the deed right now. It takes a few minutes, right?”

Heck, I've seen the deer around here, the dogs. I know how to match up our parts.

Acheron's face pales. "That's not how I want your first time to go. Maybe it's best if I do find a mate for you."

"I don't want anyone but you."

He places his hand at the small of my back, guiding me forward. "Until we get this vamp issue figured out, it's my duty to keep you safe. That's all I can promise you right now—your safety."

Safety my ass. I'd call him out on that line of crap if I thought he'd own up to it. But he won't. I push the envelope instead. "I think you should tent it on my porch. I don't want my *future* husband to worry about my purity."

I almost stick out my tongue. Well, I do when he strolls to the podium, giving me his wide back. If he won't commit, why should I? And this *find a mate for me*? I can find a mate on my own. I have four years before the curse strikes. I don't plan on dying by vampire or by curse anytime soon. Or being forced to mother a child. What if I'm not good at it? I mean, it's hard to parent a child when fear keeps me hidden inside my cottage on most days.

But I have time. Even if my inner wolf sulks, putting her head between her paws, because she wants all this mess behind us.

The truth is, maybe I have to accept that Acheron's already decided that I'm not right for him, even if I believe he's right for me.

Until Acheron's honest with his feelings toward me, and I don't know if that will ever happen in our lifetimes, especially with this vampire-demon war and hunting virgins for their blood, he's never letting down his guard around me.

I'm pushing and he's retreating. I'm no fool. He's not going to be honest with his feelings toward me and take dating me public. He's filed me under his *responsibility*, and I'm to be treated as such—a healthy, breeding-aged female who's charged with growing our dwindling numbers. A good little she-wolf. Yikes.

I enter the amphitheater as Acheron calls the meeting to order. The air is spiked with a sour scent, much like fear. Or maybe it's all me. I can only imagine the announcement and Acheron forcing my hand to his mate of choice when I spot Ben Smultron while listening to Acheron's warning to *be aware of your surroundings because a vampire was swimming in the sea*. There's more going on than Acheron is saying. Enter his twitching under-eye skin.

Ben lifts his hand and waves at me.

But before I can respond, a blur of movement behind him catches my attention.

I squint, and when my mind registers the threat, my heart falls to the pits of my belly.

It can't be what I think it is. Unless filtered light doesn't harm—

The fast-moving figure slams into me, but before I can let out a scream, the vampire carries me away.

CHAPTER 8



Acheron

Pain comes swiftly, it's unrelenting when the loss of a loved one is involved. I howl, a searing ache sprouting behind my ribs when I don't see Eve. Families scatter, children wail, but Eve's absence will be the nail in my coffin if I don't bring her home. "Find Eve! Spread out and track that fucking vampire. I want it destroyed!"

The verbal order is all my body manages to muster as I sink to my knees, finding Ben at my side a second later, his solid hand on my shoulder rescuing me from my numbness as he guides me upright.

"I was looking right at her," Ben explains. "But she was looking at you when they took her. Whatever capacity you need me, I'm here to rescue your mate."

I thought I kept my desires hidden, but I fooled no one but myself. Clearly, if a non-pack member recognizes our connection, the vampires have as well. The SA. But I can't fret about anything except finding Eve. "Just help me find her."

Ben stalks toward the guards...

I may have broken my promise to Tasha to keep her safe, but I have a second chance to rescue Eve, to tell her that I'll fight for her, for us, even as my choice could destroy everything we know and love.

I sniff the place where she last stood, catching the sweet scent of her floral essence, and my wolf explodes out of me.

The flash of physical pain is nothing compared to the loss I'm feeling if I lose Eve to those vicious vampires forever.

I flick my tail and lick my canines. My wolf is as hungry to find her as he's ever been. I've been holding him back. Playing it safe, even as he's begged me for permission to claim Eve as his mate. *I'm sorry... I'm sorry.*

But words demand action. If I find Eve, I'm claiming her as my mate.

Decision made to right things between us, I burst into a sprint, paws digging up the earth and sending chunks of dirt behind me. I can sense my loyal pack following me into battle. I hope their loyalty to me doesn't get them killed.

Because vampires aren't supposed to have the ability to appear during daylight. I've made a grave mistake depending on the myths, assuming that my pack was safe. That Eve was protected as long as she was with me.

I'm to blame should harm come to her. In the same breath, what else have I missed about the skills of the vampire, their attributes? Their weaknesses?

The trail opens, the sea visible on the horizon. I churn up the ground under my paws, the same trail I traveled with Hades.

If a vampire-demon war is taking place in Northern California, if I survive rescuing Eve, I'm making it my mission to devolve their scrimmage before my pack is caught in a crossfire no one will escape.

The bluff from where I first spotted the intruder comes into view. I pull up short, glancing down at the shoreline and identifying two sets of footprints that disappear into the surf.

I'm not a great swimmer in my wolf form. But in my human shape, I excel.

I shift, spilling my human form onto the shore, and my pack arrives behind me. "They've taken Eve into the water. I believe it's a shortcut into the caverns."

Maxon stalks toward me. "There was a strong scent of the ocean inside the cavern where Tavin and I found the vamp that killed itself. I believe it was low tide..."

Nodding my understanding, I think quickly. It's no longer low tide. "If I enter the ocean, I could be ambushed or pulled under and drowned, which isn't an option I'm willing to risk. Finding Eve is of utmost importance. To do that, we need to stay alive. We'll take our chances in the caverns, on solid ground. Let's go..."

We break into a run until we reach the edge where the bluff disappears, and a sharp drop-off takes its place. "Down here."

I grip onto the outcropping, hovering halfway between the bluff and the opening to the cavern, when I catch a vampire wresting Eve out of the water.

My heart slows. She's alive.

A hand on my arm halts my descent.

Maxon narrows his eyes, warning me not to dive in without a plan. His expression is matched by Ben's and Jaxson's, Axzel's and Tavin's.

They're right in their thinking, which is why they're my Alphas. We're a rare pack, five Alpha's beside myself living, working, and supporting one another, having each other's backs instead of warring with one another for dominance and control. If we keep our combined strength concealed and erase the threat of these vampires, we won't attract SA's attention. Probably.

“Acheron!” Eve cries out as she disappears into the dark entrance of the cave.

I clear my swollen throat. “They’ll be expecting us.”

Ben gets into a position to lower himself to my perch on the flat, vertical side of the bluff. “They know our numbers and are using Eve as bait to lure us to our deaths. But you say go, I’m ready to fight alongside you.”

The last thing I want is to get these men killed. They are fathers and husbands, except for Ben. But rescuing my mate is my job. I promised her. “I’ll go myself—”

“No,” Maxon stamps out. “We stick together as a pack, family.”

“What’s happening with the ocean?” Axzel points in the direction of the surf.

The sea retreats, revealing the sediment floor and urchin-coated rocks, as if a tsunami is heading our way. Gravel springs from the side of the bluff, pelting my body as the earth shakes.

I cling to the rocks. I have an idea what’s about to happen—*who’s* about to happen—which means I need to find Eve and fast before Hades, the Giver of Wrath as I’ve labeled him, destroys these tunnels looking for his woman. If Hades is here, he must know something to show up. “Follow me. Stay together.”

We leap to the shoreline below and hustle toward the cavern’s opening. The saltwater may have licked the entrance for the last time a few moments ago, but I’ve lived here long enough to have memorized the tide tables, and the tide will drown us all if we don’t rescue Eve and get out of there fast.

It has to be Hades controlling the sea.

“We don’t have much time before the interior vadose zone fills with water and blocks the tunnel leading to where you found the first vampire. Once that happens, a water trap will form and cut us off from wherever the hell these vamps are taking Eve. We have to hurry.” I burst into the darkness, my men close behind.

The hissing sound comes from the entrance.

I whirl around, putting my back against the barnacle-laden wall. I don’t expect to be ambushed from the opening, but then I hear hissing coming from deeper in the cave, toward us.

“We’re trapped.” Axzel takes up a defensive pose.

I meet the gaze of each man. It’s not so much as a good-bye but my approval to do whatever they can to kill these blood-thirsty vermin and survive.

When I’m convinced we have a chance at winning, I push out my wolf. My groans through reforming bones fuel me to find Eve.

My men use their bodies to protect me while I’m most vulnerable, the six of us taking turns until we present our wolf forms. It takes us less than thirty seconds to reveal a kaleidoscope of colored furs, each of us blending against each other. Where one of our body’s ends, another begins.

I take up my position and set my mind to breaching vampire lines. Once I break through, I have a shot at the tunnels, at finding Eve.

With a nudge of my snout, I give the signal.

Maxon picks two members to aid him in attacking the vamps at the cavern entrance.

I lead the back. With a shove off the cavern floor, I launch myself, making solid contact with the chest of the largest vampire.

He goes down, his head smacking the rocks.

His eyes spin in their sockets, but his stupor won't last. Snarling, I sink my canines into his neck and shake him like a ragdoll.

His dark blood splatters the rocks, and his neck's cartilage crunches under the force of my bite. The sound of his neck snapping from the spine echoes within the cave.

My smirk is erased by the nausea that boils in my belly. I'm beyond worried about Eve. She must be so scared. She must think I've abandoned her by not showing up by now. Because each foot I gain, I'm sent back ten by another line of vampires.

I lash out with my front paw, the claws connecting with my target.

His high-pitched cries stab my ear canals and cause me to howl. But I'm not about to stay down. With a snap of my jaws, I sever his head from his body. Then I set my sights on the next vampire. And the next...

"I'm coming, Eve. Stay strong. I felt you in my head last night. It's you I've been waiting for. Since the first day I welcomed the Silver Bend pack, it's been you. You were barely eighteen. We had so many obstacles. Fucking time against us. But I saw your wolf then. I see her now. You are my second chance. My mate. I can't wait to tell you that I love you. Hold on. I promise I won't fail you. If you'll only give me a chance."

The punch comes out of nowhere, knocking me down and severing my connection to Eve. The vampires seem endless. I have a fleeting thought that this rash decision on my part will get my entire pack killed. But then I force myself to remember who I'm fighting for. Eve. I'm fighting for our future. Together we can make a difference in all shifters' lives if we survive this.

If we don't win, we'll never return to our families, and right now, Eve is my family. She has my heart, and though I struggled to admit it, she has my soul. I wish I had all the answers and an endless supply of power. I growl through my bloody teeth, "Hades, I could use help here..."

A third round of vamps enters from both ends of the cavern.

I check my pack, all of us bit up, bleeding, straining to hold on to our shifter forms, and one-by-one failing. I'm the last to return to my human shape, but at least I have my voice. "Form a circle, back-to-back. If these vamps want a fight, we'll give them one. The Timber Cove wolves don't back down."

"I'm barely winded," Tavin jousts, his eyes wobbling in their sockets and looking like he's concussed.

Of course, he'd be the one to keep us pressing forward, always the challenger, no matter how badly he's injured. But I can't help but accept that it looks bad for everyone. It's six against a multitude. I'm no closer to finding out where they've taken Eve. "We fight to the end!"

The ground shakes and cracks split the cavern floor, several vampires losing their balance and falling into the fiery depths.

The wind kicks up, an updraft from the rising heat as Hades floats upward, breaching our world. His dark hair swirls and his dark eyes catch the glow of the molten earth below. "Where is Aradia?"

"You with this Aradia obsession." The selfish fuck. "Hold back these vamps so I can rescue my mate, and I vow to help you find her. No matter what it takes."

Hades holds out his arms, and the blast of power strikes the vampires, their bodies igniting into a flaming orange

maelstrom.

While Hades holds back the vampires who have mounted the entrance of the cavern, I press forward into the blackness. The vampires may be surrounded, allowing me to escape, but the tide has risen. The churning water cuts off my view of the opening in front of me. The chilled sea smothers Eve's scent that will lead me to my mate. As I dive into the unknown, I send my final message: *"I'm coming for you, Eve! Hold on!"*

CHAPTER 9



Eve

If fate calls, stand up and answer. I punched to my feet at the tickle I felt at the top of my head not one minute ago. I felt the same sensation last night when I was searching for Acheron telepathically. Then, as clear as if he were standing beside me, I hear his voice in my mind, and I answer, *“I’m here, Acheron. Follow my voice. Keep coming. I’m not more than a half-mile in.”*

“You can hear me.”

His tone is one of relief, the silent sigh as audible as my racing heart. *“I heard everything. I felt you block me last night. Whatever was troubling you, we can work it out together. It’s what true mates do. I don’t know how this is possible, this connection we’ve forged, but I am here for you, for all of it, no matter what.”*

“I love you, Eve.”

I can’t believe what I’m hearing, but I know my response by heart, *“I love you too. Just hurry. I twisted my ankle, and I have a human woman with me. Even though she’s been bitten and drained, she’s the strongest human I’ve ever known. She took out a vampire all on her own. A human winning against a vampire is a miracle.”*

“I know of miracles, Eve. You’re my miracle.”

“You’re mine.”

Rocks shift in the distance. Acheron is close, but I have no idea if the vampire who was guarding us is still around. *“Be careful, aware.”*

“The woman—what does she look like?”

I turn toward her. I don’t want to see her, and my reasoning sets my heart pounding. *“She’s fair-skinned, almost pale. But then the vampires had their way with her veins, stealing her blood. The woman killed the vamp who tried to bite me. Her hair is brown, bouncy, or could be if she was showered and her hair styled. Her eyes are the most beautiful green I’ve ever seen, a cross between jade and the deep, dark sea.”*

“No wonder her mate is infatuated.”

To be honest, I’m afraid of telling Acheron the truth about Aradia. She’s the spitting image of the painting he keeps above his mantle, of Tasha, his first love. What if he sees her and changes his feelings for me?

Reincarnation... It’s not real, is it? Aradia can’t be his deceased wife, reborn. She can’t have appeared, throwing a wrench in our happily ever after, not after we’ve just connected, could she?

But I owe Aradia my life.

Acheron enters the cavern, and he freezes when he spots Aradia, his jaw dropping.

Any man would have this response to seeing her. She’s breathtakingly gorgeous, even with puncture wounds on half of her body. At least the parts I can see.

I hold my breath, a knot lodges in my throat, and tears spring to my eyes. “This is Aradia. But I know you see her with a different name.”

Acheron's steps are measured, as if each one brings him closer to our ending. How could I have been so naive to think that Acheron would be mine so easily. He loves his wife. Somehow, she's here, waiting for him.

"Eve, God, I thought I'd lost you." He hoists me up, crushing his body to mine, burying his head against my neck. "Are you hurt? Did they touch you?"

I shake my head and my eyes leak. I'm unsure if my tears are from being rescued or due to Acheron's decision to *see* me, only me. I hug him right back, even though my ankle throbs. But it will heal as soon as I get a chance to shift. "I'm okay. They didn't hurt me. But don't ever make me walk a cavern in these soaking boots."

"I'll never boss you around again. You know what's best for you. I'm listening. Promise." He sets me down, kneels, and takes up Aradia's hand. "Your... A man is looking for you. His name is Hades and he's the strongest, bravest beast of a man I've ever known. He's waiting for *you*...and I promised to bring you home."

When I think it's regret I'm sensing in Acheron as he strings out the word *home*, he smiles up at me.

"Home. Yes, I want to go home," Aradia agrees.

"I don't know Hades well," Acheron explains. "But he has the kind of devotion for you that I've only seen in fated mates. I think it's time for you to go. If you'll let me help you, I'll take you to him."

Aradia nods as she stands. "Hades... That's an interesting name..."

Acheron lifts me up, wrapping my legs around his torso, while he takes up Aradia's arm, guiding her. He carts me out of the chamber, and when he releases Aradia to go with Hades,

he doesn't give her a second look. Even though she's the spitting image of his first love, he doesn't take pause.

"Let's go home, Eve." Acheron cradles my body.

I embrace his neck, holding on for dear life, holding on to our forever. "Your place or mine?"

"I have a bigger bed..." He flashes me his wolf eyes.

I kiss him, and I don't stop peppering his face until we bypass the massacre and make our way to the shoreline, the setting sun giving the horizon a brilliant orange glow. "It doesn't matter where we're together as long as we are."

He takes my mouth with his, and my soul explodes. The taste of him is an elixir that leads me to heaven because I see stars. Stars that have led our kind to find their mates for as long as shifters have roamed this earth.

He pushes my hair from my eyes. "You're my light. You're my everything."

I kiss him deeply, and our souls fuse as the world spins around us.

Somehow, no matter our troubled future, Acheron fights for us, for light, for happiness, for new beginnings, and for our love. We may go to war with the vampires tomorrow. But as the sun trades places with the moon, I know for certain that Acheron Suda is mine.

CHAPTER 10



Acheron

Life surprises arrive at less opportune moments. Take Eve. After slaughtering the vampires, she tied her arms around my neck, locking me to her for my entire pack to see. I couldn't be prouder. After fighting for our lives to be together, miraculously we're finally both on the same page. We are fused in a way I never imagined possible. Holding her, knowing she's safe, letting myself, for once, pour out my truth and the feelings I've tried to hide from her, is the most pleasurable thing I've experienced in decades. But at what cost? Do I care? "I would take you right here in the woods if we weren't covered in vampire slime."

"And I'd let you."

I give in to her seductive look, pausing along the trail that leads to my home to press my lips to hers. Damn if she isn't ready, accepting my kiss until our tongues dance, until I forget where I've just come from. Every cell in my body fires as our bond metaphysically tightens. I can't help but want to climb inside her body, as her strength and eagerness to see us mated sheds light on our future. "You even taste like sunshine."

She lifts her mouth from mine. "I feel safe with you, Acheron. Safer than I've ever felt in my life, even after being kidnapped by vamps and witnessing what I believe to be divine intervention with that Hades guy. But what I want is to

forget the disaster that could have happened and for you to make me yours.”

“Done,” I stamp out my proclamation and up my pace on the narrow trail, low branches slapping against my shins. I ignore the snap of pain, and my feet having a mind of their own—along with a very specific body part.

My wolf is one hundred percent on board to mate Eve. Except when I breach the door to my home, I come to a jolting halt and jostle her in my arms.

The scent of charred wood and musty earth races up my nose. Glass and the gaping hole in my living room remind me that Hades could destroy my entire house on a whim if Aradia goes missing again.

When Eve gives me a quizzical look, I feel the need to explain. “Hades has anger issues...”

“He’s consumed by Aradia. I could see that in his eyes, not much different than when you look at me.” She shifts in my hold and blinks her dark eyes at me.

The low rumble in my throat is enough to keep me moving past the cooling embers, satisfied that my house won’t go up in flames, but will need a construction contract asap.

After I’ve claimed my mate. I stuff all the shit that lays crooked ahead of us to the outskirts of my mind. I’ll deal with the pack, the potential secondary vampire attack, the reappearance of Hades, and the reconstruction of my living room. I know what has to be done. Mostly.

The Shifter Alliance? I am not the only shifter to take a second mate. Not the only one to flee the SA. In fact, my Second’s wife was forced to mate with Tavin, who is now mated to Kayla. The list of archaic rule breakers is layered and deep. Which means there must be a way to evade the SA as others have. I just have to figure out how.

Their eyes are on current leaders, packmasters, not some insignificant deceased Alpha's daughter.

Their focus should be on the vamps taking our virgins, I mentally shoot back.

I shake free of my dark thoughts and turn my attention to saving Eve's life from the vampires, and if possible, the curse.

The walls of the hallway leading upstairs rush past in a blur as I carry her upstairs. But I grit through a bolt of anxiety when I reach the second story. What lies behind the closed door to my bedroom is anything but deserving of my mate. All evidence that love awaits I obliterated, which is bittersweet. I don't deserve Eve, nor her innocence, but I'm too amped up to stop our forward progression.

If Eve hadn't been kidnapped the first time, I wouldn't have realized that her loss would send me spiraling into another stent in self-pity and reckless depression. She's as much a part of my life as Aradia's is to Hade's—a cosmic connection—and our bond is stronger than anything I forged with Tasha. "I hope you like hardwood."

"Will it be that firm when we mate?" Her eyes flash the whites skirting her brown irises.

But her tone is so damn innocent, too honest, that heat rushes to my cheeks. She hasn't laid with a man before, and I feel the need to explain the nuances of my dick, but then she laughs.

"I'm playing with you, Acheron. I'm a virgin, but I'm not innocent or naive."

"Okay." I breathe a sigh of relief that's chased by nerves. The decor is as raw as I've felt since losing my mate, as if some ghost timber forest has taken over my home.

Not to mention that I've been so busy with my packmaster duties that I never considered romancing a female past a

hookup outside of the compound. Maybe I've fucked a human a few times since shifters came out to the human population and scratched an itch we both needed scratching. But I've never had a full one-night stand or brought someone home because I prefer fucking in a parking lot, back seat of a car, up against a tree—an hour tops and then I ghosted. I didn't give the deed any weight. Until now.

No woman compares to Eve nor the lengths I'll go to protect her, to see her satisfied. "I'll be gentle. I promise."

"What if I don't want you to be gentle? I'm a shifter, and I'm not fragile. But—" She pauses to tap her lips with her index finger. "I didn't realize until this moment that I'm pushing you. If you don't want to mate with me tonight, we can slow this down."

I swallow a gulp because she has no idea, after nearly twenty years, how much of an Alpha wolf I want to be in the bedroom with her. How much I want to prove that I'm worthy of her love. Yet, for her, I find myself wrestling with how our first time together should go. I don't want to take her like a werewolf during the rutting season. No, for her, I'd do anything to please her.

She's not the only one on virgin ground here, though. It's been forever since I've made love. What if I'm not the man she's made me out to be. Yes, taking it easy may be the right thing to do, but my wolf is about to snap and take over. He knows what to do, what needs to be done.

For her survival.

I clutch the door handle, twisting it half a turn. "My bed isn't made. The sheets... Shit, I washed them last month?"

"I'd roll in the blood of our enemies with you, Acheron. I plan on having sex with my mate in every way—here, outside, on the beach, under the ferns when the fog rolls in, beneath the

wolf moon. The closer to the earth the better. Now carry me over this threshold and make me your woman.”

I hike her up and kick the door, exposing the knotty-pine shiplap, furniture, and black silk sheets. It gives off a broody mood, and I realize how much the color choices reveal my pain. There is no sign of the man I once was in my early twenties... But that’s about to change.

She slides from my arms, testing her ankle before taking a step. “It’s better, healing...”

“Good, that’s really good.”

She wanders the room, running her hands over the heavy, sculpted footboard. When she gets to the bathroom, she casts an approving gaze over her shoulder and whistles as she inspects the open shower and jacuzzi tub in the bathroom.

It’s then I hear her in my head. *“Tasha had beautiful taste, in both decor and men.”*

I wince. I don’t want her thinking of Tasha every time she’s with me. I answer her back, even my mental voice sounding strained when I say, *“I built this house for a family I thought I’d grow, but that dream expired. Now, I have a second chance with you. This home is yours. I’ll change whatever you don’t like to make it yours.”*

“No,” she whispers, touching the brass faucets before returning to me. She places her hand on my cheek, smoothing the creases under my eyes. “It’s perfect, better than anything I could have imagined because I’m here. And if it wasn’t for Tasha, you wouldn’t be who you are now, which is the man, however tortured, I’ve fallen in love with.”

The pinch in my throat keeps me from speaking for a beat. “Damn, Eve. How can you be so young yet understand the anguish, how broken I’ve felt, how healed I’m feeling, how

lucky I am for not only a second chance, but a new future with you. You're perfect."

And I hope I don't fuck it up for both of us.

I lean into her, or she leans into me, both of us clinging to each other, our wolves connecting, as if each breath we're melding skins, heart, and our souls.

I didn't have this experience with Tasha, even though she was my mate. It just wasn't this intense and raw.

Eve eases back and takes my face in her hands. "Never feel guilty for our unique connection. No relationship should be compared to another. I don't want you to twist your memories for me, I want you to open up and share them. They are part of you, welcome. Or rather, the memory of Tasha lives, and I welcome her."

My eyes sting and I give Eve my profile. I don't want her to see my emotions, no longer from me missing Tasha, but from Eve's openness. "I love you, and you are my future."

Her hand on my cheek pulls me to face her.

"I'm ready to be yours, so those nasty vamps don't take me again." She smiles up at me, a slash of dirt riding her nose.

I break a smile, though it's strained. She's so damn endearing. "I want to wash every inch of your precious skin to erase traces of those filthy vampires."

She swipes at my hair and comes away with a hunk of goo that quivers between her fingers, as if it's reaching to find its missing owner. "I was thinking the same. But vamps can reanimate, right? It's best we both strip and toss our clothes into that smoldering pit in your living room. Turning vamp parts into ashes is the only way to stop them from cloning themselves."

A shiver of disgust darts through me as I remove what little clothing I'm wearing, my stretchy shorts and underwear, little worms of flesh wiggling about the cloth.

She sucks in a breath, but it's not the vampire debris that holds her attention. It's me, my tattoo-covered flesh, and the Alpha who plans to take her.

I roam my gaze over her supple curves before I meet her dark eyes. I've seen her nude hundreds of times, shifting in and out of her form, but never intimately. Me? She's seen me a time or two, but I'm not a wolf who boasts his prowess.

I reach out, taking her clothes and tucking them under one arm. I twist on the shower, letting the water steam up before I turn back to her, and my breath catches in my throat as she slides past me, brushing her breasts against my arm as she steps into the shower. "You're beautiful, even with dirt crusting your arms and face."

She takes her lip between her teeth and winks when she spots my erection. "Hurry back. I've waited all my life for *you* to make me yours."

CHAPTER 11



Eve

Have you ever had one of those *be careful what you wish for* moments? I experience fringed nerves the second Acheron leaves the room. I'm lucky I don't short out under the shower spray, I'm so excited. But part of me is also nervous—and scared. Acheron made his intentions clear. However dangerous mating me is, he's ready. OMG! I'm about to fuck my packmaster.

Okay, fuck isn't what I'm going for. I want Acheron to be tender and to make love to me. But let's face facts. I'm about to be impaled by the mast he's sporting. I mean, I've heard my best friend brag a time or two about size and how it matters when it comes to sexual pleasure. But I don't think she'd be gloating if she experienced Acheron's sex.

He's huge, and I'm worried I'll be a virgin forever because he'll never breach my opening to the point of breaking my hymen.

A maniacal laugh escapes me. I mean, where does he think he's going to put all of that? I've felt around down there. I've given myself pleasure, but I've never put more than the tip of my finger inside me. I'm not saying I'm opposed to masturbation. It's just that going all the way with myself felt like stealing my virginity from my future mate.

I practically slip on the wet tiles, shocked that I'm naked and waiting for Acheron to reappear after all the dreams I've had of him. It's nothing short of surreal.

I just hope I don't do something that reminds him of how much younger I am than him.

I shake my head and then hear his steps hit the stairs. I have a million questions racing in my mind about how he'll do the deed. I've never been with a man. I don't know what to do to please him. But when he enters the bathroom, pulls me close, soaps his hands and begins to wash me, as if I'm to undergo his white-glove inspection after the shower, my anxiety-induced pounding heart calms a bit at how careful he is with me.

He is not a newbie, rutting wolf who has set out to roughly stake me for sport in a matter of minutes. Acheron cares about me. I can see how he takes his time washing me, making sure every speck of grime disappears, and the bruises left by the vampire who kidnapped me are healing.

He does much the same with his own body, washing himself until the red-tinged sudsy water swirling down the drain turns clear. He doesn't speak to me, and I get the feeling that he's as nervous as I am, or at least overthinking.

“Are you sure about this?” I ask, hopeful.

“Touch me,” he growls.

I suck a quick breath at his command. Whether it's his wolf taking charge—out of duty or pure biology—both of us begin exploring each other.

His chest muscles are rocks under my hands. I expect the fine dusting of hair to be coarse, but the strands are soft and smooth. He has so many hard edges and angles to his physique compared to my rounded curves. I expect his jaded stature

helps to ward off people—another method of keeping himself walled away in his pain.

His mental scars have molded his facade. But his outward appearance is a lie, and I think I'm the only one he's letting down his guard with. My heart swells and a tear slides down my cheek, I'm so honored.

I don't expect the rush of emotions to hit me. I want to be as bold as the colorful tattoos I trace—this man has endured so much pain.

He lifts my chin with his finger. "What's going on, babe."

"You are magnificent," I whisper.

His lip quirks into a grin and he brushes the runaway tear from my cheek. "I'm just a man..."

I like when he smiles, but when he smiles at *me*, my pulse skips a beat, and the shower walls fade away, as if I'm floating in a bubble. Our breaths replace the sound of the water spray. The way his mouth mates with mine coaxes a mewl of pleasure, and his hands roaming across my breasts send fire to my core. I lean into him and wrap my arm around his neck. "That feels good. You touching me. I've waited so long..."

"I'm only beginning..." He takes one of my breasts into his mouth and rolls his tongue across the nipple, flicking it.

I shudder, and suddenly, all those romance novels I've read make sense—whatever is happening between us is worth fighting for.

His hands on my body erase my heavy thoughts and fears, and I arch into him and my body seems to know what to do. My skin tingles and warmth builds between my legs. I'm certain I'm wet and not just from the shower. Even more, I can't believe I'm with him, the man of my dreams.

He slides his hand down my belly to cup my wedge and the mound of fur.

I bite back a whimper. If he's grossed out by my hair, he doesn't let on. But I wish I was shaved like non-shifting women I've heard he's been with. Maybe he's chosen human women because he knew he'd never take another mate and it was easier for him to sever the connection after fucking them.

When he drops to his knees and kisses a path across my breasts, licking each nipple and drawing a purr from me, I don't think he's worried about pubes or his past escapades. I don't think I am.

"Spread for me. That's it. A little wider." He scoops me up, balancing my thighs over his arms.

I place my hands on his shoulders to balance as I lean against the warm marble wall. But then I spot his dick. It's beautiful and standing at attention, no part of it is out of proportion from the other parts.

But my anxiety heightens. There is no way I'm going to outrun this curse, since I'll never be mated or fall pregnant because he won't be able to enter me, he's so large. All this risk Acheron and I are dabbling in will be for nothing if he can't get inside me.

"Don't think, just feel." He stares up at me, his one dark eye hooded and holding a look of hunger I've never seen in any man. "I'm going to make you come."

My core throbs from his decree. My bestie never told me about making love with an Alpha. I don't fear him. If anything, he's the one person I count on to never hurt me—unless doing so has a reason, like he's saving my life.

Acheron hikes up my body, balancing my legs over his shoulders, and making sure his face is level with my sex. The spray of water cascades over both of us, but I don't care. His

mouth on my mound is as hot as his hands cupping my ass. This is one hurdle I want to fully experience. I don't want any other thoughts of our past or future rushing in and compromising this moment when my eyes close. "I want to watch you."

His growl echoes in the steamy room just as he finds the slit in my folds. He trails his finger around my lips, delving in every few strokes to test the dewy center, but he doesn't enter me. When he spreads me open and licks the bundle of nerves that control my gasps, I almost lose my balance. "Sorry."

"Don't be. I'll catch you."

He's damn serious as he begins to stroke my clit with his talented tongue, and heat explodes from my core. It's definitely not how touching myself feels. It's almost taboo, almost too much, and then I start to float in a river of heat. Something powerful stalks the verge of pleasure he's giving me.

My wolf is trusting him, opening to this male, this man, our mate, and pledging her soul to him. Instead of fighting the fear of what's to come, I melt into ecstasy. When I'm panting, squirming against his face, shaking, I admit, "I want you inside of me."

The words are not my own, yet they are. I've always been reserved with my sexual desires. Playful and flirty, but a tease. I feared sex, the pain of it and losing my virginity to the wrong man. But Acheron is mating me, he's experienced, he's everything right in my world.

I reach forward, grip his hair, and I begin to move. He works his tongue across my sensitive bud, his tempo quickening. A finger slides into my opening.

"Tell me if I hurt you and I'll stop."

Stop? I don't want one more second to pass by. "I'm good."

"You'll feel pain. There's no getting past that, but I'll go slow."

He works another finger inside me, stretching the opening, letting my body rest as it absorbs the intrusion and sharpening pain. He deepens the pressure, retreats, enters me again, the rhythm teasing pleasure to reappear.

He's doing everything right. Making sure I'm wet and ready to take him. Technically, his fingers might have deflowered me, but I don't need to see him to hear his thoughts. *She's so small. I'm never going to fit. This can't be a mistake.* "Maybe we are," I breathe, regretting it as soon as I say it.

He lifts me, smacks the wall, turning off the spray, and folds me in a white towel. He's so fast, I'm dried and on the bed before I can protest. He crawls over me, looking me right in the eyes. "We're not a mistake. I'll prove it."

Be brave, Eve. You're not the first virgin to be devirginized. Is that a word? I wrap my legs around his hips, drawing him down. He's not alone in his all-encompassing need to mate. In saving my life. I reach between us and wrap my fingers around him, feeling the girth expand. I can't feel my thumb meet my finger on the other side, but I doubt anyone ever died from consensual sex. Right?

"How about I try something?" He places his hand over mine, guiding himself to my soaking opening.

When he rolls his head in my juices, I slide my hand out from under his. I clutch his arms, close my eyes, and try my best not to tense. He eases in, slowly penetrating my body, inch by inch. I'm almost bursting from how full I feel with him inside me. There's a tug-o-war of pleasure and pain. But with each throb of his hardened length, he pauses, allowing the

muscles of my walls to relax. It's a miracle, really, that my body knows what to do, allowing Acheron to stretch me in the most pleasurable way, not only accepting his body but his soul.

“Fate has drawn us to each other. This can't be wrong...”

The rawness in his voice is clear. It would be cruel to bring us together and for him to watch me die, either by vampire or by curse. To lose a second mate is inconceivable. “We are shifters. We have control over our bodies. You are the most controlled werewolf I've ever seen, both in body and mind. I put my life in your hands. Claim me, Acheron.”

He rocks his body, slowly at first, and any pain I endured is replaced by a delicious pleasure.

“You okay?”

“Yes, keep going.”

His tempo changes as he ups his pace, and I follow his rhythm, I match his breaths, and a second later a blinding orgasm is followed by a bright light that bursts from behind my eyes. Heat blazes through me, as if my soul is on fire, and the world as I know it fades away. Shockwaves of ecstasy rock me. “Acheron!”

“Eve! Fuck, Eve!”

Whatever is happening is not of this realm, but then I feel Acheron on this wild ride with me—moving inside me, his warm palms on my face, his seed filling me up, and our souls fusing.

I open my eyes to witness our union. To catch Acheron toss back his head, giving over to the power of our mating bond.

Only, as Acheron rides his orgasm and returns to me, the man above me is no longer the same man who rescued me

from that cave hours ago.

Two clear eyes stare back at me. Two dark-brown eyes! As if mating with me has healed him. But that's impossible, even as I look closer and accept the truth of our mating.

The chiseled lines in his face and his hardened facade have softened. As if my pain, my sacrifice, my blood, has caused my mate to be reborn. He looks more like a man of my age, a twenty-year gap that's suddenly been closed.

“Are you hurt? Eve, say something. Your face has paled.” He glances between our bodies. “You're bleeding. Shit. Let me get you—”

“Don't move,” I tell him as I pat him down, looking for other changes, and finding the scars on his back have disappeared. I don't know how he earned those marks, but his tortured past is what made him off-limits to challengers and kept them at a distance. “I'm good. Better than fine. But Acheron... Please don't panic.”

CHAPTER 12



Acheron

No one wants to hear the words *don't panic*. Not when they just mated a virgin and she's bleeding like she gave birth. The inadequacies, those I felt because I couldn't stop Tasha from hemorrhaging and dying, rush in. *You don't deserve a mate. You think you can keep this one alive longer than nine months? You're fated to be alone. Eve's too besotted, young, and foolish to know you're the one who's going to get her killed.*

I shove the onslaught of negative thoughts away and focus on stopping the blood dribbling out of her. If I can get a handle on that, Eve won't end up buried near the base of a tree and my forever shrine.

I wad the towel I wrapped her in prior to our lovemaking and press it between her legs, the pure, white terry turning crimson in my hands.

She grabs my arm and makes me look her in the eye. "Stop whatever you're doing. I'm okay. I'm okay, and you're killing my buzz."

"You're bleeding." I show her the towel and damn if she doesn't lift her nose, as if she's proud, strong, ready to display the damn thing out the window for the whole pack to see.

“Most cultures celebrate consummation and demand blood as proof of purity.” She blots herself, coming away with a second but less amount of red on the towel. A tiny smile appears.

Is she insane?

More like in shock. Yes, her nonchalant attitude to seeing red has to be some post-coital delirium. I roam my hands over her body, checking for bruises I caused. I’m worried about her. Even though she told me, word-for-word, what Tasha said before she died—*I’m okay*—I don’t believe her. Look what happened to Tasha. “This isn’t normal. I need to get a doctor here, stat.”

“I don’t need a doctor.” She sighs and presses her head back onto the pillow, a look of relief washing over her face. “In fact, I can feel myself healing as we speak. Look again.”

I peel off the towel, the bleeding much less than a few minutes ago. She’s entering her needing period and the bleeding is a bit more than expected. So why am I overreacting?

“I’ll shift to heal quicker, if that will make you feel better, since the proof of our having sex seems to bother you.” Her smile turns upside down.

My heart breaks, not because I’ve injured her but because I’m not acting like a male who’s claimed his mate. I’m still seeing her as vulnerable, and, if I’m honest, naive because of our age difference. It’s a shitty thing to think and to show. I pause and palm her face. “Is that what you’re thinking? That I want to cover up what we just shared? It’s not that at all. I only wanted your first time to be special, and I’ve already taken that from you by worrying I’ve hurt you.”

She blinks up at me. “I’m not ashamed. I’ve wanted you since the first time I saw you. Now that I’ve finally had sex with you, I don’t want to overthink what’s happened to my

body. I earned this right of passage. I'd wave that towel over the balcony if I wasn't worried about vamps sniffing out my blood. But listen—"

She's rambling on about how amazing being with me is, but in the back of my mind I can't help but replay my first mate's pregnancy. Tasha struggled to keep from losing our child. In the end, that stress tore us apart, and I ran from it and buried myself in pack politics and lost both of them. I don't want to repeat my past. "Lay your head on the mattress and lift your ass so I can put a pillow under you. Let me at least take care of you, wash you..."

"After what I just explained, you're serious?"

"Very. I need to see for myself I haven't damaged you down there."

She rolls her eyes. "Only in the best of ways. I want to do it again, but maybe in the morning..."

The morning....

The Alpha in me wants to take her right now, my mating hormones sending me into rut. But the man I am needs proof she's not going to die at my hands. "Appease me, please."

She does as I ask, lifting for me so I can raise that part of her body higher than her heart. When I'm satisfied with the angle, I spread her knees and peer closer. She's not flooding the sheets with her blood. She is beautiful and healthy down there, her sex still swollen. I'm certain she'll be sore, but she's not dying after having sex with me.

"Satisfied?" she sasses.

Her fiery personality is one of the things that drew me to her. But she's looking like she's about to wolf out if I don't give her an answer. I take her wrist and locate her pulse. "Almost..."

Her breathing is slightly higher than the normal seventeen beats per minute, and her pulse is resting at a solid eighty bpm. Again, slightly elevated but within normal range considering what we just experienced. Her blood pressure isn't dropping. In fact, the sound of her strong beat is music to my ears. When her smile falters, I dip into her thoughts just to make sure I'm not missing something.

“How do I explain to Acheron what mating did to him without shocking him. Shock of my mother's death sent my father into cardiac arrest, and I lost both parents in the same hour. I can't risk that with Acheron. But I have to wonder what problems will swiftly head our way if he considered hiding our mating by going about his life as if nothing has changed. The broody, tortured Alpha, the one who's mostly reclusive in this mansion on the hill, as if the Blind Leader has been some cursed beast, will certainly be exposed the moment he ventures outside. I can't deny that he's in mortal danger, now more than ever. There is no hiding the changes that our mating caused.”

Sitting back on my legs, I pat my face and blink while nerves squirm in my gut. Truth be told, I was so worried about her that I failed to notice my normally blurred vision in my blind eye—the eye that could see only shadows—is clear. The magic behind true mates is powerful, but I've never heard of physical transformations like I'm experiencing. “I'm an Alpha. Whatever came from our mating, I own.”

“That may be true, but I doubt others will accept you so readily.” She sits up, drawing me close, and takes my hands, stopping them from shaking.

Since when do I shake? I don't show my emotions, normally. I'm like she said—broody. I keep to myself. I'm the Alpha in charge. I can't be showing my weaknesses.

“Acheron, something happened to you during our bonding. You're actually glowing, but that's not all...”

I check out my arms and torso and give a nod of agreement. I'm golden, angelic, a symptom I never experienced the first time around, which could only mean—

I swallow a budding knot in my throat. My love for my first wife overshadowed our bond. "This can happen with true mates. The mating bond is mysterious. Magical. Obviously, we were meant to be together because my hue proves it."

She nods and glances at her own arms, a small glow radiating off her skin. "Yes, that was amazing, I agree. But once we step outside this house, everyone will know we are truly mated. I thought I was ready—"

"You're having doubts?"

"No. Never about being with you. But there will be pack members who have lost their mates and won't be happy for us. Anything but. The SA law has dissuaded them—a death sentence is a hell of a deterrent. As a leader, you've pledged to follow and uphold their laws. I'm as guilty of breaking them as you are, so how do we go about this new way of life?"

She's gazing at me and wanting answers, but I'm so relieved by Eve's continued strength that I push the concerns of the SA and our pack members to the back of my mind. After the vampire attack and what I learned about a supernatural war on the horizon, the SA will have their hands full. Not only that, but no one from the council would recognize me in my new form. Unless someone rats us out, we are golden—literally. "True, but we have tonight to celebrate our bonding. I don't want to steal that experience from you."

I lay her back and settle in beside her, holding her and languishing in our coupling. I've never felt my body snapping with electrical charges, and every cell in my body recognizes that Eve is ours. She is my Alpha and my Omega. My new beginning and the future I never thought I'd have. Even if a

dark undercurrent churns around us, I'm owning my decision to make her mine.

Here in my arms, she is safe and sated. I pull her closer and she nestles against me, her breathing turning to soft snores after a few minutes. The mattress pulls me down, and as I drift off, I whisper, "Sleep, babe. I'm here and I'm never letting go..."

But nightmares of the SA prisons filled with vengeful shadows pull me down into scream-filled depths I can't climb out of.

* * *

Acheron

Waking up in a silent scream is never a good way to start the day. Just when everything seemed perfect, someone pulled the rug out from under me. In my case, my responsibilities to my pack, regardless of the night I had with Eve. She's still sleeping, and my mind spins with what to do next.

As much as I want to stay right here, loving my mate for the next few days, that's a pipedream. I only hope Eve understands that being mated to me comes with conditions. I can't lay with her when my pack could be in danger. I can't languish in our cloud of bliss or the mating hormones engulfing both of us, keeping me hard for her.

Still, I breathe in her sweet scent and stamp into memory how well our bodies fit together. Mating her was challenging, but we got through it together. If I'm being honest with myself, I don't want the packmaster job at the moment. It was a point of contention between me and my first mate, and, already, I can anticipate it will be a problem with me and Eve. She's not going to understand why I'm not in our bed when she wakes up, and guilt cloaks me like a tomb.

Maybe I should wake her and explain why I have to leave. But if I do, I'll leave my pack vulnerable. Without a strong pack, we're doomed already from future attacks.

Carefully, I use pillows to replace my body, trapping in my residual body heat. I slide off the mattress, cursing myself silently. I tuck the blankets around her, giving her a once-over before I head to the shower.

Her cheeks are flushed. Her lips are tinged purple from our kissing. The subtle nuances of our mating remind me that she's

the sweetest thing I've ever laid eyes on, and she's all mine.

My cock twitches and my wolf is eager to mate with Eve again, but I'm reserved as I spot the towel on the floor. It's in both of our interests that I let her heal. At least, I tell myself that...

I shouldn't make decisions for her. But a few minutes later, I'm clean, dressed, and have a pen in hand. I've never had to explain myself to anyone. It's not my way. My word is law.

Yet, when it comes to Eve, the pen draws a faint squiggly line where it meets the paper, proving my hesitation in leaving her alone. There is a place in the house no one should see. One in particular I haven't entered in years.

A room I can't face because my biggest failures reside inside behind the closed door. Maybe I should have my Second take charge or inspect the caverns so I can stay here. So I can explain myself to Eve.

Maybe I've bitten off more than I can swallow, once again attempting to balance life, love, and duty, and failing.

I shake my head as I press my pen to the paper. I *can* trust my mate not to snoop. I've never known Eve to cross lines.

Well, not until last night with me. *My precious Eve...*

CHAPTER 13



Eve

Sometimes dreams come true, but what about nightmares? I wake up sweating and gasping and plunged into the blackness of a room that isn't my own. But as I rouse, Acheron's mating scent wraps around me like a hug, reminding me that I'm safe with him. Or as safe as I can be with vampires on the hunt for my blood. One in particular who tasted me told me I was his. Even though the bite healed completely, it's as if I can feel his essence skittering through my veins, as if a spider I'd seen on my shirt earlier is still hiding in the creases. It's enough to give me the heebie-jeebies, until I realize Acheron is butted against me.

It's just a dream, Eve. The vampire is dead, reduced to ashes by Aradia's soulmate.

Soulmate. I breathe a sigh, having found my own. What Acheron and I did last night was real and amazing. But being kidnapped a second time didn't help my PTSD, and I attribute the nightmare to such, my mind's way of fighting the enemy and working out the details of my survival.

I blow a breath and force myself to focus on the here and now. On a memory of Acheron kissing me at some point in the night. I was too exhausted to return affection. But that was then. My core is wanting him to fill me up. I crave his voice, telling me to open for him. "Acheron, are you awake?"

I pat the space behind me where I feel pressure along my spine, my hand finding covers bunched up around a heated mound. I'm eager to have sex with him this morning, and in my mind I can feel his presence. He wants me too.

It's so strange waking up in bed with the person I'm going to spend the rest of my life with. My bestie told me that mating can last for days, so I stretch, testing my muscles to see if I can move after last night. I want to bring the best version of myself to our mating bed. I'm ready to do more than lay flat on my back while he pleasures me. I want to learn about his body and how to make him feel good.

I scissor my legs and find only my center tender. If I were human, I might not be able to walk right, but I'm a shifter. I've mostly healed in the night. I almost welcome the darkness, since I went to bed with my hair wet. I want to shower and clean up. I don't want to be distracted by the smell or sight of my bleeding, or to scare off Acheron with my bedhead.

A giggle slips free of my lips as I ease out of bed and pad my way to the shower. Acheron must be just as exhausted as I was since he doesn't make a sound when I close the bathroom door behind me with a soft *click*.

I flick on the light and blink until my eyes focus. In the mirror, my hairdo is a bird's nest, and I pick a downy feather out of it. Must have come from the pillow.

My lips are red and slightly swollen from making out. If I'm honest, I'm glowing. Which reminds me that Acheron was way more affected by our mating.

I shake my head, pleased with myself. I don't want to lose this euphoric feeling, so I usher myself into the shower, which douses me in hot water. Any residual tension swirls down the drain along with the pink-tinged water.

I use soap and shampoo. Acheron likes manly scents—spice and sandalwood. I love that I smell like him, and, if I'm

honest, I want everyone to know he is mine. I'm mated to the packmaster. The strongest Alpha wolf in Northern California. The one not to be challenged.

My mom and dad would be so proud of me, as my role in the pack comes with tremendous responsibilities. But I can only hope I didn't disappoint them by mating a man I shouldn't have.

Yes, I question what being mated to the packmaster will look like. I can't just bust out gloating about my new mate, not when doing so could draw the wrong attention from the SA.

But first things first. I plan on making love to my mate asap. I'll worry about hiding from an entity I've only heard of, like the boogeyman, later.

I towel off, comb my hair so it lays flat. I'm lucky that it dries straight. Some people's hair has natural waves to the point that it looks frizzy if they don't apply product and straighten. But mine is the opposite. I have thick strands that dry flat, as long as I don't go to bed with a wet head, like I did last night. I give myself one last look and make my way back to bed.

I crawl onto the mattress, arching my back and letting my hair fall to one side, going for a sex-kitten look. I snuggle in beside—

A body pillow? I pat around the long foamy mound and give it a good punch when I realize Acheron isn't in the bed. He's not in the chair in the corner. He's not on the floor. In fact, when I send out my feelers and locate my mate, he's not on the interior compound at all. Nope, he's headed to the beach and the caverns with his cronies.

I listen in to his conversation, teasing the border of our bond so as not to interrupt the conversation he's having with his Alphas. *"We'll be here as long as needed. Until nightfall*

and through tomorrow morning. I want every one of those vamps terminated...”

I hiss, and a bolt of disappointment stabs me in my belly. This isn't how I thought waking up would go. How life together would start—him forging a mission without talking it out with me. He may have been a bachelor for the past two decades, but that time passed. He has me now, and I'm depending on him to spend today with me.

Tears threaten and I rub my eyes. *Pull it together, Eve. How did you think mating Acheron would go? Did you think he'd hole up with you for a week like a beta male. He has responsibilities to his pack. You're never going to come first, not when lives are at stake.*

We are not my parents. We will never be when so much is weighing against us. I flick on the nightstand lamp, noticing a slip of stationary with the sweetest endearment written in cursive.

My precious Eve...

*Make yourself at home. The kitchen is stocked. I left you a set of clothes in the closet. I'll be thinking of you all day. I promise I'll be home as soon as I can. I love you, babe... ~XO
Eron*

Eron. Gah! I clutch the note like I'm hugging my mate. I read the message twice, and am champagne bubbly, I feel so light, flutters in my belly give me all the feels. He loves me.

But then I notice a faint eraser mark. In the dim lighting of the room, I can make out a few letters, but it's illegible. I mean, he erased something, so of course it's unreadable in the darkness. Still, my curiosity gets the best of me, even if I'm feeling all gooey from the message.

The window is covered by blackout curtains—no surprise there, Eron prefers his privacy.

Me? I want to view my world and explore every single facet. My time here is limited if I don't beat the curse. It's a conundrum I weigh. Eron's job is essential. It was before I was ever born.

I pull back the lined linen curtains and hold the note up to the morning light. The erasure fades the cursive so it's barely legible. I squint and read the words Eron didn't want me to see.

P.S. Please don't go into the loft...

My brows tent. The loft? What's in the loft? Acheron didn't flinch one bit showing me his destroyed living room, what was left of the smoldering pit. What could be so shocking that he wouldn't want me going into the loft, which seems to be some kind of third-floor attic that's barely visible from the exterior of the mansion? Although, having a loft would explain that row of dormer windows that I always thought was part of the facade.

My belly growls loud enough to stop my musings to deal with survival.

“Fine, fine. I'll hunt us some grub.”

It doesn't take me but a few moments to strip the bed, gather up the laundry, and start a load before finding the kitchen, which is a marble masterpiece. The silver appliances are tucked under the upper cabinets and hidden by a slide down door. Every item is polished chrome like the muffler of Eron's bike.

I giggle to myself. I'll never get used to calling him *Eron*, not after all these years. But I like it. *Eron and Eve* has a ring to it.

I plug in the toaster that is crumbless, that little drawer in the bottom sparkling, as if it has never been used, which isn't true. Or at least I don't think it's new because there's a breadbasket filled with different flavored bagels.

The coffee station is like the hidden appliances, tucked away behind folding doors. There's a pot already brewed and Sumatra-scented steam wafts into the air.

I pour myself a cup of coffee, adding cream and sugar. The cream cheese is cold, but it soon melts on my cinnamon raisin bagel.

When I clean up, a thought strikes me.

Everyone has secrets. This kitchen. That room Eron doesn't want me snooping around in.

What could be so bad? A god came out of his floor.

So what if he has baggage. Doesn't everyone? I keep the puppy teeth from the first dog my parents gave me, her collar with the tarnished gold-plated heart, and a lock of her tail feathers. It's silly, but that golden retriever was important to me. I planned for her arrival, buying her the perfect snuggly bed, chew toys, and liver treats. Those few months before I held her were agony. I wanted her so badly. I drove my parents crazy asking every day if today was the day the puppy could come home. I treasured all her milestones up until she passed away at the ripe old age of thirteen.

Truth be told, I keep her ashes and trinkets in a decorative box on my shelf in my room. It's not something I flaunt. Even my bestie doesn't know about Jasmine. But she is eternally part of me, and I don't want to hide her away.

I imagine the loft can't be so bad. Acheron is type A. I'm sure it's filled with storage boxes. Probably numbered and labeled. Since he could be gone all day, and I don't want any secrets between us, I'll just take a peek. That's it. One little innocent look, and then I'll bury my curiosity. Out of sight, out of mind. What could be worse than a gaping hole in the living room? Or a shrine under a bed?

* * *

Eve

The last thing I want is to leave a trail of breadcrumbs. I take one last look at the kitchen and then head upstairs, cupping the underside of what remains of my bagel. With each stair I climb, I become more fascinated with this house, which doesn't feel like mine at all. But I digress...

Apparently, Acheron collects fine art, as the stairwell is lined with paintings. Or he paints?

I pause at one in particular, a girl standing at the edge of the bluff, her white silk shawl floating behind her. Her dark hair is as long as her slender body, but she has a neutral look about her. She could be anyone and everyone.

I swallow a lump as I notice the same woman in most of the paintings. She must be special to Eron, or he wouldn't display them like he has for anyone who enters the foyer to see them.

The woman is looking toward the horizon and out to sea, her silhouette always in the background and appearing dwarfed by the landscape.

I'm feeling just as small in this huge, empty house, the sound of my footprints on the wooden stairs echoing in the vaulted stairwell. "Hello!"

"Hello, hello, hello..." Echoes reverberate in the space.

I finish the last of my bagel and pocket the crumbs while admiring the paintings. Whoever did these pictures has beaucoup talent. But it's the woman who holds my attention as I make my way up to the second floor, her features taking on a familiar look.

I can't help but feel jealous of her freedom and her beauty, as if she doesn't have a care in the world because she's holding all of the painter's attention.

I guess it could be representative of Acheron's first wife, though I'm not exactly sure. She seems distant, unreachable, dreamlike, and faceless in some of the frames.

I grip the baluster that spins a half circle leading to the third-floor loft. The coffee and cream cheese spin an anxious soup in my belly as I ascend. There are no paintings here, only cobwebs tucked into the recesses where the ceiling meets the walls. The banister is dust covered and dulled by time.

My heart races, and my wolf tucks its tail. She doesn't like this space, the musty scent of old parchment filtering in the hallway leading to the closed door. "It's only file boxes behind this door. Pack member profiles and confidential information. Geesh. Don't be a scaredy wolf."

To prove I'm right, I reach out and grip the door handle, but my sweaty palms make opening the door difficult. "It's now or never, Eve. Get the lead out and face whatever monster lies behind this plank."

Really, what could be so bad? A single paper cut never killed anyone, right? Okay, maybe getting sepsis from a cut could cause my demise, but I don't plan on touching anything. I'm only looking.

I wipe off my damp hands on my jeans. A moment later, the handle gives way, but I hold the door so only a sliver of sunlight coming in through the dormer windows shines into the hallway.

The blinding light makes my eyes water. This is a bad idea, but I know myself. My adrenal system can't take anymore surprises. Not that I think I'll find anything to make me jumpier. I just want to feel safe in this house now that I'm

alone. I could be the only one here, day after day until this vampire thing is cleared up.

I inhale a breath and push the door, the hinges complaining, as if they are ancient bones.

I freeze in place, my breath catching in my throat.

Boxes three to five times the size of bankers' boxes lean against one side of the wall. A crib, or what appears to be the making of one, is in disarray and still wrapped in its original plastic. A car seat is trapped inside its masking-taped container, as if Acheron and Tasha were never pregnant, as if they had nine months to prepare for a child and neither one of them dedicated time to ready this nursery space, as if time itself stood still at some point in their pregnancy.

Or Acheron was too busy with pack business to make time for his wife and unborn child.

Gooseflesh covers me and water pricks my eyes. I enter the room, a single step, tears of empathy running down my face. It's supposed to be *my* mating time, a celebration of *our* coupling, a union that could produce *our* child—the child who will save my life. The answer to our dreams by having our own family.

But what if Eron doesn't make me or our child a priority? What if all I'll ever get from him is a fancy house full of secrets, words without actions, and empty dreams, like those paintings I'm now certain are of his late mate, who wanted a future that never came?

CHAPTER 14



Acheron

The best way to win a war is a preemptive strike. But not all fights are physical, even as I cut a swath in the sands toward the seaside caverns and lead my men into a potential battle. The guilt I feel for leaving my mate vulnerable during her needing period is nearly soul crushing. I should be with Eve when she wakes up. I carry her life in my hands, after all, and I love her. I don't want to fail her, but perhaps by leaving our mating bed I already have.

Just like you failed Tasha.

“Which way?” Ben stands at the Y, one tunnel of the cavern splitting off from the other.

My foggy brain doesn't clarify my next move. I'm too wrapped up in self flagellation. What the hell is wrong with me? How will I gain a happy future when my pack depends on me to make a decision that won't put their lives in danger?

Since yesterday, I've been wrestling with direction, like the way I'm working over the decision to return to Eve. Do I serve my mate or pack? How can I excel with one if doing so puts the other in a vulnerable position? “Split up. If you find a live one, bring him to me. Maybe this one will talk.”

Flamethrowers in hand, the Alphas I charge split into two groups, dividing my attention in three directions. The

underground systems are as sharp as a wolf's nails and molars. To say entering is easy would be a lie. Every twist and turn could lead my men to their deaths, even if the tunnels are void of vamps. Then there is Eve. I can feel the sting of her disappointment as if I'm riding a razor's edge.

"We'll make him talk," Tavin growls.

The cavern walls line with algae, and a trickle of water snakes through the solid basalt layers, making each slippery step treacherous. No plant life springs from the soil, no light comes from any source, save for the flashlights we carry. But that steady drip of water creates a constant rhythm, like the tick of a clock counting down to the next attack.

Or my mate's continued sadness in me. It's what I fear most, letting Eve down in some way before we've even had a chance to start our path to the future.

I tell myself things will be different this time. I'll be different. But here I am, leading the pack. The tunnels glisten with death, and light reveals a sea of freshly ashed vamps. "Hades' work, after we left him to do his bidding with the horde."

My pack murmurs in agreement.

Tavin kicks at a mound. "The stench is a rot of compost and decay, mixed with the metallic smell of bodily fluids. I hope to add to this pile."

A smile pulls at my lips, pushing me onward. The walls are always cool to the touch, ice on my skin. It gets narrower and colder the deeper I go. We manage to squeeze through, but the chill worsens, as if a sign telling me to turn back, return to Eve and the warmth of her embrace instead of this treacherous place.

Why am I here instead of tucked into bed beside her? I should be with her, loving her, caring for my mate.

“Nothing here but death and soot,” one of my men calls from a distance.

Hades may have nodded he’d take care of the vampires, but I’m packmaster. I’m the one in charge of cleanup on my property, and that includes destroying any remaining vamps, even if it appears they’ve been reduced to dust.

“Should we go deeper?” Maxon asks.

“Up until where I found Eve and Aradia. It’s not far...” I’m pushing my men like I do myself. The problem is my men bear injuries from the fight. Maxon is cradling his wrist and his knuckles are oozing through the bandages. Both Jaxson and Axzel have abrasions on their faces and no doubt bruises hidden behind their clothing. Tavin winces with every breath. Luckily, he’s a quick healer and his wife is a nurse who has wrapped his ribs, so they’ll set properly. Ben has a limp he assures me is a sprain.

It’s nothing compared to the damage I caused Eve by ghosting her today.

My men may act nonchalant around me, but every single one of them has scrutinized me on this journey. I know their thoughts: *Why is he glowing like he’s been touched by Midas and has drunk an elixir from the fountain of youth? He’s putting the pack at risk of the SA. Who will lead us when he’s taken away?*

My body may be renewed by the magic of my mating, but my mind is still trapped by past transgressions. If Eve goes inside the loft, she’s going to see me differently, as less of a man, and unreliable at best...

Try as I may to ignore the onslaught of my failures, I can’t. Still, I muscle through with my direction. “Axzel, take two men and go up ahead, past that dip in the tunnel. There’s a cavern to the right. Check there. If no vamps are present, we’ll call it done for the day.”

“On it.” He trots off with two Betas.

While the younger members are out of hearing range, I drill my Second on details of the attack. “Maxon, what are our stats regarding the injured?”

“Most of the pack were hurt in minor ways, and a few of our women took a hard spill. One of the littles was knocked to the ground and her arm had to be cast. All I’m saying is if anyone comes at us in the next twenty-four to forty-eight hours, I doubt a skeleton crew could stop them from taking some of our preteen girls, if it’s virgins the vamps are truly hunting. My own daughter included.”

The growl I utter shakes pebbles from the craggy walls. “If a second wave of vampires attempt to breach the compound, I won’t have them using this section of the caves to enter before they’re on top of us.”

“Are you thinking about the dynamite we have stored?” Maxon quirks a brow.

Am I? Do I want to waste precious explosives when a bigger threat could be upon us in the future? “Not yet. Let’s keep a sentry on the beach for now.”

“Who do you suggest? Gunner?”

The sound of his name rattles me. What will he do when he sees I’ve taken a second mate after I’ve denied him time and again, fearing the SA. I’m screwed right to the floor. “Not Gunner. Keep him at the front gates for the next week or so.”

“He’s going to want to know why...”

It’s a copout and Maxon knows it. I hold out my arms, as if he’s freaking blind. “I thought I’d have it all figured out. Eve and I would circle each other until I grew old, and she got tired of waiting for me. But after yesterday, the thought of losing her... She’s mine. I mated her. I just don’t want anyone who’s

already irritated with me to run off blabbing about *their packmaster taking a second mate.*”

“I’m your Second for a reason. Now that we’ve established Eve is your mate.” He looks me up and down. “I’ve never seen such a transformation. Gunner won’t be the only wolf wanting answers. First the vamps attack and now this. How are you planning to explain not only your youthful appearance but your decision and not draw attention to our pack?”

“The fuck if I know. I’m no Benjamin Button, but I’ll come up with something. In the meantime, the pack’s welfare is a priority.”

“No. Your mate—her needs and her life—is more important than the pack, which means you shouldn’t be here with us.” Maxon finger combs his hair, as if he is thinking about what he’s adding. “We got this—cleanup of lingering vamp parts if there are any, which I don’t expect we’ll find. Not after Hades’ skills. Acheron, you have to delegate authority. Even if it’s for a short time. I’m ready...”

“I know you are.” I scout the area, more to evade Maxon’s scrutiny and to hand over my duties. I don’t want to admit that I’ve already failed the first test of being a worthy mate by leaving Eve when I have Maxon. I’m literally holding her life in my hands. I’ve trained my men, clearly. They are smart and strong. Natural leaders. They can do the job of patrolling blindfolded.

I kick at the ground, holding up for a bit. I don’t want to let go of my control, even if Hades turned this place to ash and it looks like my escort is leading me to a dead end. I’m too stubborn. Too controlling. Too afraid that if I make a mistake others will die. “I’m a packmaster. I know what’s right for my pack.”

Maxon huffs. “I’m not arguing who’s in charge. I respect you and your decisions fully. But I’m concerned about Eve.

She had a trying time after being kidnapped that first time. She already suffers from PTSD, and then yesterday, a second kidnapping. She's got to be crazy with anxiety and hormones, and *you're not there to ease her pain.*"

His words come like a punch in the face, an echo from my past. I wasn't there for Tasha. I put the pack first. I had to establish my dominance as a new leader. I didn't know any difference. But I've grown since then. At least in some ways. It's true I'm finding it hard to find balance when a threat is as much upon us as the challenging Alphas of my past.

What are you afraid of? Failing? Blood on your hands? You'll have to make a choice: Eve or Pack. Which will it be?

"Got something... Smells like sulfur. No signs of demons, but I believe they've been here..." Axzel pushes back hair that's grown out since he became his own Alpha and family man, waiting for me to give him orders.

I came looking for vamps and found demons—wretched beings who can travel between realms and who can take a human form. They could be anywhere and anyone.

Anytime... Eve could be in danger.

My gut knots and fear kicks me into action. I can do better. Be a mate and a master. If I cut out sleep... I shove the flamethrower into Axzel's hands. "Take this. Report back to me after thoroughly inspecting the caverns up to that cut off spot where the cavern fills with water."

"Will do." Axzel spins away and trots off.

Maxon claps me on the arm. "Take another full day. We all need time to heal. And stay low." He strolls into the cavern, disappearing into the darkness.

I know what he's telling me—hide my mated transformation. Vampires aren't the only thing that can kill me if word gets out to disgruntled pack members or the SA.

Demons have their own agenda, and I need more than my pack to help me uncover the newest players.

After I check on Eve.

I give one last look into the cave, telling myself that I'm in control, that I still have the higher ground, and then I bolt, and I don't stop running until I pop out into the sunlight and sea air.

Birds crowding the canopies take flight as I breach the forest, whose songs are overtaken by the *click, click, click* of my boots on the path. I make my way through the redwoods, brushing against ferns that hug the ground until I breach the compound and my house on the hill comes into view.

But then I see movement, and I grind to a halt.

Curtain shears flutter in the third-story dormer, and a silhouette glides past the loft windows.

My heart falls to my feet and I stagger where I'm standing. Eve. What have I done? She thinks she knows me, that I'm diplomatic, fair, that I'm passionate about who I love. That all my secrets have been revealed to her, and I have no flaws. I told her to trust me...

But that room is stacked with pain and self-loathing. I may fear vamps and demons, but I fear failing Eve more. Worse, what will she think of me now that she's discovered my greatest failure?

CHAPTER 15



Eve

Guilt is a compromise of moral standards. That's what my mother used to tell me. But if your mate keeps secrets, and clearly mine does, which one of us is most at fault? Okay, probably me. I feel the weight of my guilt like soaked driftwood on my shoulders. That's even before Acheron enters the front door. Because I don't want to disappoint him by my betrayal nor admit that he is not the man I thought him to be.

We all have secrets...

I pause sweeping the glass in the living room, and his eyes flash wide when our gazes meet. Does he know I saw the loft? Can he feel my emotions leaking out of me, the fear that he'll abandon me and our potential child that could be growing inside me, like I assume he did with his first mate?

I have many questions, but his hands open and close. He's spun so tightly that I don't know if he'll ever break. I don't know if I'll be stuck, like that poor woman in the painting wanting something she'll never grasp.

“Hey...”

His voice purrs across my skin, and I am butter. Maybe it's hormones keeping me anxious, but when he stalks toward me, my legs turn to liquid and I mumble unintelligently, “I missed you.”

He removes the broom and pan from my hands and places them gently on one of the end tables. “Did you now?”

I want to tell him yes, but my mouth doesn’t form the words. “I was cleaning up. Although I didn’t get far.”

He lifts my chin, and the hunger in his gaze is mixed with obvious knowledge of my betrayal. He’s not the only one who can telepathically connect with me. He had years to master it, and I’m not even twenty-four hours into this new skill. Plus, he’s madly intuitive. It’s why he’s the top wolf of our pack.

I swallow my suddenly dry throat. I’m in trouble. I can sense it bone deep when he takes my hand, gripping it and rolling his thumb across the top too vigorously for pleasure.

“What else did you get into while I was gone?”

“I made a bagel and showered,” I spout way too jovially, but once the ball rolls, there’s no stopping my verbal vomit. “I stripped and washed the bedding. I’m waiting for them to dry. They should be ready any minute. I started dinner. Pot roast and baby carrots, gravy, and red potatoes. Hearty because I knew you’d be hungry when you returned.”

Mmm... “Is that everything?”

I think back, counting down my steps before I peeked in the loft. I wasn’t there long. Maybe five minutes tops. “I made a list of things I want to grab from my cottage. I thought we could go together.”

“Maybe later...” He pulls me toward the stairs.

My feet are bricks. I know exactly where we’re heading, and I have no idea what kind of punishment he’ll deliver when we arrive at the door to the loft.

I mean, my ex-packmaster was brutal. He’s dead now, but he wouldn’t have blinked at whipping me after what I did.

Draven never overlooked betrayal, not even the tiniest indiscretion.

Once, I picked a rose to give to my mother, and he found out I trespassed into another pack member's yard, earning me five lashes with a leather strap.

You'd think I'd learned my lesson, but all I kept of the beating was that Draven was angry at the world and I'd become his whipping post du jour.

Eron doesn't seem angry at me. No, the energy seeping out of him has a balance to it as he leads me upstairs, carefully picking his steps, as if giving him time to weigh his emotions.

The painted woman on the bluff races past me. I swear her expression takes on a pitiful look, as if she's shaming me for being curious.

He holds up at the second floor, swings me around so my back is against the wall, and presses his body against mine before I blink. Fingers in my hair, he mates his mouth to mine, and my body explodes with mating hormones. God, I'm a pinned butterfly in his hands, and he doesn't even know how much I'm enjoying the mixture of pleasure and pain.

But at the same time, I think he's showing me he's in control. He has reasons for limits. Reasons that could protect my life.

Winded, he leans back and licks his lips. "More of that soon. But first, I told you this house is yours. I meant every single room and floor. I love you, all of you, your curiosity and grace. I know you have questions about the loft. I trust you with my heart and soul, with my secrets, Eve. But you didn't have to rush downstairs when you saw me coming and pretend to clean. I don't want you to think you have to sneak around behind my back for information. Of course, there will be times when I need you to listen to me. Do you understand what I'm

saying? I don't want you to think you have to lie to me when everything I'm doing is for us, and to keep you safe."

Relief is quickly replaced by confusion. Does he think I was in the loft all day? I may have been curious. I skirted his boundaries. I mean, I'm happy to hear him tell me to come to him if I have questions, but after seeing that space, it seemed too personal.

"I'm not mad at you. Promise. I only wanted to explain myself and the room when I showed it to you. It's part of me, but not necessarily the good parts. All I'm saying is I'm not perfect. You're going to learn about things I've done in the past. I just hope what you find out doesn't corrode your image of me, and make you hate me. Although, I'd think no less of you."

My traitorous lip quivers. This is the man I love. He's warning me about his past. If the loft is the worst of it, I hope, in time, I can understand him and what he thinks is so bad about it. "Nothing could keep us apart, not even my independence it seems. I'm sorry I went up there. I swear I only opened the door and looked in."

He takes a step backward, a dark look forming in his gaze. "Eve, I saw you wandering up there not five minutes ago."

I don't want to argue, but I don't want to be gaslighted or left feeling confused. Draven, if anything, taught me to stand up for myself. If I wasn't up there, then who was? Who is?

Acheron must notice the change in my respiration and pulse, or has mastered listening in on my thoughts, because he carts me inside the master bedroom in a blur—he's just that fast of a shifter with inhuman speed.

"Did you hear anyone enter the house?"

I shake my head. "Just you, but then the dishwasher was running, the drier, and the whole-house fan could have

covered up the sound of footprints upstairs. I didn't see anyone inside this morning, only the guards you positioned outside the house."

His Adam's apple bobs. "Stay here."

"No," I say adamantly. "Two shifters are better than one, if you think someone is inside."

The two of us check the hallway and then creep our way up to the loft landing.

Acheron flashes me a look not to crowd him as he partially shifts, his bones liquid beneath his skin as his upper torso bulks up into his werewolf form. His shape is bold, his features morphing into a monster not to be messed with.

My wolf prances and my heart is a marching band at full crescendo, both from fear of what comes next and pride that our mate isn't scared to protect us.

He twists the knob, shoves the door open, and sucks a breath.

The sulfur smell hits me, as if a dozen rotten eggs exploded in that room.

I gasp, cover my mouth, and begin to shake. The room takes on a conic glow, and my peripheral vision fades as my anxiety rushes in. I can't seem to get a deep breath, and I can hear my pulse.

This isn't a good sign. I'm a wolf shifter, not one of those ridiculous fainting goats that lays down and faints, waiting to be devoured. *Get a grip, Eve. Remember your counseling and coming up with soups alphabetically to stay in the present.*

I whisper-chant: A to Z soup, beef and barley soup, clam chowder soup, dandelion soup...

The fog lifts from my brain, Acheron growls, and canines the size of nails appear. A moment later, he's shirtless and

pounces into the front portion of the loft. His nails elongate on one hand, which he raises to chest level, ready for a fight.

Even as he rips through the larger boxes to peer inside and behind the smaller stacked cubes, coming up with nothing, I feel uneasy. No one likes to be ambushed. But worse, I no longer feel safe in this castle in the sky. Not when a being from another world could appear inside a closed room.

Because what was the demon looking for? More exactly, who? I was the last one here.

A bad feeling brews in my belly, telling me we have to leave. We have to find another place to stay, somewhere not as easy for a shadow-being to find me.

But, if we leave our home, where will we go? My cottage is cozy, but it's made of wood, not stone, like Eron's. It's as if death is coming for us, our home, our relationship, our pack, and it won't stop until its debt has been paid.

But between flight or fight, I can't flee. It goes against everything in my nature. I have to stand beside my mate and fight this shadow creature.

Acheron yanks open the closet, and the door goes flying.

I leap out of the way, landing on my paws, even though the door misses me by a good ten feet. Acheron is so aware of his surroundings, of me, but I'm trying to find my bearings. It's hard managing fear when it grabs hold and attempts to paralyze me. It's hard finding my footing knowing the floor could open and swallow me at any time.

"Come out and fight, coward. Let me do the honor of sending you back to hell."

A shadow zings past Acheron. It zooms around the room in a blur of black smoke, until the being's eyes glow red when he spots me, and then he leaps toward me.

CHAPTER 16



Acheron

“Oh, hell, no. Not a demon!” Eve’s eyes flash wide.

With a shove off the wall, since Eve doesn’t have time to take up a fighting stance, I tackle the shadow creature, both of us hitting the wood floor with a teeth-shattering *crack*. I drag the faceless shape back into the room by his ankles.

Eve gasps, mimicking my surprise when he takes a human form.

“Ben. No, not Ben.”

Not only does the demon morph into a recognizable one, I wonder how long he’s been walking among us. Was he inside the house when I made the call summoning Ben to the compound? Did Ben really ride up on his motorcycle? Was he really hunting vamps inside the caverns alongside me? Or has this creature from the underworld posed as our confidant? “What have you done with Ben?”

“All are casualties of war...”

Anger boils in my blood, and the heartache Eve feels for Ben’s loss transcends space. I try to calm her. “He can mimic anyone. We don’t know if Ben’s really gone...”

It’s true. I can’t verify if the demon is telling the truth about Ben’s demise, but I don’t care. He’s entered the wrong

fucking home.

I pull back my clawed fist and ram it into his face, splitting his lip, which leaks a black silky substance. “Who the fuck sent you and why have you come?”

He squirms under my hold, his form shifting between Ben and some scaled lizard creature with molten eyes—the thing of my nightmares.

My rage peaks and I clench fists. Tunnel vision takes hold as if my very birth hinged on me killing this beast. I raise my fist—

He leaps up, his gaze shooting to the window. The portion of his body I was holding is air in my grasp.

The window shatters and the dark shape sails to the ground.

I check over my shoulder, making sure Eve is still behind me. With a look, I express to her my plan: We don’t have time to wait if we’re to catch him.

I dive through the broken glass, my body in freefall, the stench of sulfur the only hint that the demon was here.

Midair, I morph into my wolfman form, landing on my pads. I search the landscape, scenting his trail. The air is still, a dead zone under the moonlit forest.

Eve lands beside me. She sniffs the air. “He went that way, to the caverns.”

My fur prickles and I catch the faint, acrid scent of sulfur on the breeze—a clear sign that the demon is near.

A bone-rattling tremor surges through the ground.

“He could be trying to descend. This way.” Eve bolts ahead.

She's in her human form, and I catch up to her just as we spot the beast.

Towering and sinewy, its eyes blaze with malevolence, crimson flames flickering in the darkness.

My heart races as I exchange a glance with Eve, our unspoken understanding evident. If we're to kill the demon, it's going to take both of us in our shifter forms. Only I can't risk Eve shifting. Not if she's pregnant, even if the fetus is still a ball of cells. "I have him," I bark.

With a fierce growl, my mate lunges at the demon. She partially shifts her face and hands, claws outstretched and teeth bared.

I feel a surge of protective urgency as I watch her unleash a flurry of strikes, each clawed swipe met with the demon's resilient hide. Its own wickedly long claws swipe back at my mate, and she twists and dodges to avoid the lethal blows. One glancing hit leaves a searing gash on my mate's thigh, igniting a surge of adrenaline-fueled rage within me.

In a coordinated assault, I strike from the demon's blind side. I clamp my teeth down on its arm.

The demon bellows.

Its pain-inflicted rage is palpable. But it's a fleeting victory as the demon hurls me aside, my body crashing against a gnarled tree trunk. I groan but swiftly regain my feet, unyielding determination gathering in my mind.

Locking onto each other's gaze, my mate and I move as one, fluid and seamless. We circle the demon, seeking an opening, a weakness in its defenses. I dart in and feint left before delivering an uppercut that lands squarely on the demon's jaw.

As it staggers back, my mate seizes the opportunity, sinking her teeth into the demon's thigh.

The demon howls, its echo sending a shiver through the forest.

Its struggle only fuels our determination.

“Now or never, Eron!” Eve dives at the demon again and her grip remains unyielding, despite the demon’s thrashing.

Eve’s primal fury wakes a storm inside me, one of fur and fangs. I leap toward the beast, fangs snapping and claws slicing through the air.

A swing of the demon’s tail sends me sprawling, crashing through the underbrush.

I scramble to my feet and retribution blazes within me. I summon my own energy, renewed power that I gained by mating Eve, and I charging headlong at the demon.

Dark energy crackles around its form, a malevolent shield scorching my flesh.

Yelping in pain, I stagger back, my movements slowed.

Seeing me weakened, my mate rises from the foliage, eyes burning with fiery resolve. She charges the demon, tackling it to the ground with a beastly roar of her own. Their bodies clash, the resounding thud a precursor of her future if I don’t kill the beast.

I crawl to all fours and launch toward the symphony of chaos. Scales meet fur, claws clash against wickedly sharp talons. I lift my paw and slash through his scales, pulverizing his flesh, telling myself the demon’s facade isn’t Ben. He’s not the man I’ve come to call a friend. This is an enemy of the worst kind. A lie. A betrayer. A murderer of the good and the innocent.

He must die. Another slash of my claws is followed by another as I chip away at this being. My stained knuckles are washed in my blood and his blackness.

Let us bleed. Let me prove that no demon is a match to the Timber Cove wolves.

The demon's strength wanes, its fiery aura dimming. Even as I tear into its flesh, rending scales and muscle, it stays upright. But I keep swinging—for Eve, for our family, for the pack.

The demon's screams become a cacophony of agony, its once-malevolent form faltering. With a final, desperate surge, the demon's body flickers, its eyes losing their infernal glow.

“Stop! He's dead! Acheron, he's gone...”

Eve's pleas dash through my ears, her muffled cries sounding as distant as the foghorn that warns ships away from the bluffs. But I can't stop another strike connecting to this monster. I claw at his face, tearing it from its smoke-filled shell.

“Stop! Stop!”

With every word from Eve, she sounds closer. Her voice reminds me that I am not a monster. I'm a man who's protecting his mate, his pack. But it's Eve who's protecting me. She's keeping me grounded, and her touch brings me home. I look up to see her tear-streaked face and my hand waivers.

“It's done, Eron. We are safe. We can go home now.”

I stagger back and shake free of my wolf form. “There will be others like this demon. Waiting to ambush those close to us.”

“Probably. Hopefully, not again tonight...”

She inspects my hands, my raw knuckles drenched with this demon's essence.

What remains of the demon's form convulses, disintegrating into a pile of ash, carried away by the night

breeze.

Eve palms my face, earning my full attention. “This one can’t hurt us ever again.”

Neither of us can confirm if this is true. Demons have the potential to reanimate after a period of time, as if they are renewed in the underworld.

Whether it’s the silence that settles over the forest as the tension ebbs away or the moon that briefly emerges from behind the clouds, casting an ethereal glow upon the scene, my bond to my mate solidifies as if she is me and I am her. Our strength fuses, our minds lock together, and our souls are unequivocally one.

Eve is my perfect mate, my destiny, my future. I tug her against me, reveling in another battle we’ve survived, and I take her mouth with mine, kissing her, reuniting our wolves, tasting my mate. “We make a perfect team. There may be others who will try to break us apart...”

“There will always be those ready to intimidate us, whether outside forces or within ourselves. I don’t know whether it’s the excitement of the battle or my needing hormones, but I want you. More than I ever have before.” Eve pulls me down to the ground.

The leaves of the forest cushion our weight and blanket our mating bed as lust grabs hold. I feel anything but vulnerable as I rip off her jeans, leaving her exposed. I feel invincible as a rutting wolf, drowning in the glow of her silky skin.

Mating Eve has changed me. For better or worse is yet to be seen. I’m being reckless for a forty-year-old man. But I am no longer him. I’m twenty-three. A lifetime ahead of us. A second chance. When I sink into her honeyed flesh, her heat, her touch, her moans of ecstasy, her love enveloping my soul,

I know I am no longer the hopeless man I once was. I am reborn.

CHAPTER 17



Eve

Confidence comes from love, and I feel Acheron's love for me bone deep. Fearlessness takes hold of Acheron as he pins me to the forest ground. Where he tiptoed around having sex with me the first time, this is a claiming of the nth degree. I smile through his hot-mouthed kisses, his hands that ravage my breasts, and fingers that explore erotic zones I didn't know existed. I hope that no one mistakes our animal noises for those of rogue wolves, or the entire pack could come rushing in for a fight. "Someone is going to hear us, even through the storm," I whisper-pant.

"Let them come." He flips me onto my stomach. "You are mine."

When he guides himself into my sex, he's powerful yet not unleashed, as if my body is the trophy to behold after destroying the demon. But that's how this man makes me feel—beautiful, sexy, a desired prize.

Thick droplets pelt our skin, a tropical storm's warmth washing away remnants of our fight, purifying our bodies.

I let out a gasp when he deepens his slow thrust into my core, allowing me to absorb his girth and length before plunging into me again. I keep to myself that when he drives forward, a pleasurable tingle blankets my body and my core

pulses with need. I'm alive and hungry for him to come inside me again.

"Tell me what you need," he purrs into my hair.

"Only you." It sounds cliché, but it's true. Acheron knows what I need, even when I don't. I trust his experience, but I know I have control over him too. I rock my hips and he eases in and out of me.

The weight of his chest bears down on my back, and he slides an arm under my belly, lifting me so my ass is tight against his groin. I feel awkward, somewhat dangling in the air, but I don't give voice to my insecurities. I don't want him to know how much power he has over my body and that I'm ignorant to these night moves. "Keep doing what you're doing."

With another hand, he brushes my nipples, softly, taking his time to roll each one, pausing, and going in again, and bringing me out of my head. "You're close. I can feel your center squeezing me."

I'm on the verge of coming, my face feeling hot and my core building up for a delicious release.

He angles his hips, his length reaching the depths of my insides, and stroking me until I'm whimpering and nearly blind. "Oh, Eron..."

"Come for me." He reaches around and fingers the spot I so desperately want him to touch.

That same light that exploded behind my eyes the first time reappears. I'm seeing stars while floating above our bodies that lie naked under the moonlight. Acheron's sinewy back is glorious. His ass muscles clench and release as he reaches his own apex in our lovemaking.

But even more beautiful is how perfectly we fit together, how our silhouettes align, mine a smaller version of his own. I

was born to be his, and he was ordained to be mine.

We howl in unison, the vibrations sending a cloud of bats skyward.

“Oh my God, Eron, you are amazing...” I’m winded, my words trapped between breaths, and my legs going lax when I return to my body.

I don’t know if it’s like this for every mated pair or if we are unique, but I make a vow as he rolls me over and settles between my legs. “That was better than stargazing on summer solstice, surrounded by candlelight, and chowing down a mint-chip sundae.”

“Was it now?” He lifts a wicked brow.

“Uh-huh,” I say numbly. “I love this side of you, how you’re the only one in the world who has ever brought me out of my shell.”

His possessive growl thunders in my ear. “You bring out the best in me. You make me want to fight to be alive.”

That must be it. We all need something or someone to fight for, including my mate. He’s fighting for us after years of denying it. He is the sun at full light, a solstice of his own making.

Sparks jump from our fused bodies, and he pokes at one of the floating stars. “I have something for you. A gift. Something...I’ve been working on that I hope you’ll like.”

I can’t imagine what it could be as I dust the leaves stuck to my skin. I like a lot of things. I just don’t have the after-glow mental bandwidth to note more than puppy kisses, the crust of freshly baked sourdough bread, and long, hot baths in the dead of winter. “Give me a hint?”

“Patience is a virtue.”

“After what we did, I don’t think my virtue is up for discussion.”

His chuckle melts my heart. How did I get so lucky?

We pick laundry off the tree branches, and follow the sandy trail to the house, passing my cottage that seems so empty now.

But Acheron is my new life. Before going inside, he scents the air, and with a nod, he leads me inside, past the dark, open pit, past the stairwell with the paintings staring down at me, deep into the mansion.

My tummy skitters with nerves and excitement too. I’ve never had anyone give me a gift since I was a child. “What’s back here?”

He squeezes my hand. “Patience, babe.”

I’m imagining some kind of dungeon when he guides me down a flight of stairs, so we are underground. The double doors with the intricate brass handles are a surprise. “Is this a man cave? Cigar room? You know I don’t smoke, right?”

He glances over his shoulder, his hand on the doorknob pausing half-turn. “With a twelve-room house with formal quarters taking up an entire floor, a den on the main level, and a nursery on the top floor, and a terrace large enough to accommodate the entire pack, you think I’d lock myself down here to smoke and drink?”

“Sex room?” I guess, lifting my brows, and my face turns hot.

His guffaw is contagious, and I burst out laughing. “What am I to think after the past twenty-four hours? I’ve seen things I never thought I’d see or experience. I’m trying to ground myself in normalcy, but your normal is out of this world.”

“Stay here.” He steps inside the room and closes the door behind him.

After a minute, I’m jumpy from the popping sound I hear behind the closed door. I take a wild guess that this is some kind of private catering kitchen when the smell of warm butter leaks out into the hallway. I surmise he could have a butler’s pantry. He regularly hosts pack parties on his terrace. If so, it doesn’t feel personal. *Mmm.*

The door cracks. “Close your eyes.”

Whether personal or not, my heart races as our eyes lock through the sector of space. His emotions swirl beneath the surface, mirroring my own. I close my lids and he brushes a cool finger against my cheek, garnering a shiver—a mixture of vulnerability and desire coursing through me.

This is how I feel when he touches me, even if in the back of my mind I’m reminded that I need to take charge once in a while. My hand fits perfectly in his as he leads me forward, blindly.

“Sit.”

The spongy seat folds around my body, and I inhale, trying to identify clues of his reveal. It’s definitely a food-related space, with hints of sweet mixing with savory scents. I recognize cane sugar, vanilla, cinnamon, and butter mixing with the sugar, as if I’m in a confectionary of some type. But I also smell yeast and pepperoni, and salted popcorn. “Can I open my eyes now?”

His breath tickles my skin as he leans in, his lips so close to mine that I can feel his warmth, his presence, consuming me.

“Keep your eyes closed.” He touches my nose. “No using your shifter abilities to cheat. I’m almost ready.”

Another agonizing minute ticks by, and flickers of light breach my lids. “Eron, please. The suspense is killing me.”

His breath is hot against my ear. “I know you, Eve. I’ve watched you from this empty house on the hill baking pizzas for the pack out of your tiny cottage. Did you tease me with pepperoni on purpose? And kettle corn, do you know that savory and sweet is my go-to? And laughter from your friends, a playfulness I haven’t known for decades? But it isn’t what you serve that made me build this space for you. It’s that I want you to have the luxury you deserve, a space that calls your pack home each night, not only through their bellies but to you. You are what keeps this pack together, whether you know it or not, and I want to be part of your world.”

I open my eyes, the orbs going wide when I spot the pizza oven, one as large as my entire cottage kitchen, the double islands, one lower than the other made for rolling dough. A commercial mixing machine. The popcorn maker spills popped kernels in a fountain of yellow into a popcorn wagon. Two counter-depth refrigerators with see-through front panels are stacked with an assortment of adult beverages and sodas. Another is wider, looking more like a walk-in cooler.

My jaw drops and I feel all floating again. I spin a quarter turn, noticing the snack wall—chips, candies, and soft serve ice-cream bar with all the toppings.

My mouth waters and my heart is full enough to make it hard to breathe.

This is so *not* Acheron. He’s black and white. I’m a rainbow in his world, and he’s given me a room that is so close to what I’ve dreamed of that a tear leaks from the corner of my eye. “You know what I’ve dreamed of and could never put to words.”

He places his hands on my shoulders and spins me around another quarter turn. “Are you crying because you hate it?”

“God, no. Recliner seats for the entire pack. Acheron, this is a movie theater down here with a full concession stand and pizza parlor. How did you do this without word getting out?”

He nudges his toes against the running lights that split the seats. “TikTok made me do it.”

The giggle that erupts from my chest is pure delight. I can’t see Eron surfing any kind of social media. But when a timer dings and automatically a movie flashes on the big screen, my favorite movie in the whole world, a scene with an in-love couple sitting on a sea-side bluff, I lift on my tiptoes and plant a kiss on Acheron’s lips. “Pizza, popcorn, Pepsi, and *Persuasion*... I love you. I really do.”

But as I snuggle into the seat beside Acheron, as he grips my hand with a firm pressure I haven’t felt before, I know this bliss-filled moment is only temporary. “We have a hard road ahead of us. An impossible task if we have to worry about war and the SA. I just want you to know that I’m with you, Eron. I’ll fight beside you. I’ll die beside you if it comes to that.”

He brushes my mouth with buttery lips, the taste of salt a reminder that our time together won’t always be sweet.

“Tonight, I don’t want to think about anything more than the two of us, how lucky we are to have each other. There are decisions I have to make for the pack, decisions that could split us apart for a while. But I promise you, I’ll come back to you.”

I place my fingers over his lips. I don’t want to dwell on the obstacles we’ll have to tackle in the morning. But as the movie plays and my eyes grow heavy, I just hope Acheron and I have a chance to see our future unfold together.

CHAPTER 18



Acheron

Life isn't a movie. I can't stop and repeat it, which means every move I make has to have purpose and a goal, which is a long, happy life with Eve. A blue glow radiates from the still screen and Eve is still in my arms, soft breaths of slumber rising from her chest. I'll never forget the look of utter joy on her face when she saw the entertainment room. But the happiness that dangles in front of us could be destroyed if the SA learns of my betrayal.

As renewed as my twenty-three-year-old self feels, I'm weighed down by decades of wisdom. I'm not easily lured into believing that we are safe.

No longer will my earned scars help me hold my position. I must make choices, choices that my mate may come to hate me for, if we are to survive the SA. But my options are few.

I could leave here, abandon my post, and live a life on the run with or without Eve.

I could stand my ground, with an ever-watchful eye and growing fear as I wait for the SA to show up and deliver their punishment, not only to me, but to Eve and every single member of my pack—a massacre of epic proportions.

The SA *will* come. That is certain. I'd be a fool to think differently, and I am no fool.

I could slip out on my own. It's the best option. Leave my pack. Leave my mate. Face the SA and lay out my reasoning for why their old laws don't belong in this time.

If I can overcome these dark forces, I can overcome anything.

Perhaps my ego will get me killed.

I push strands of onyx hair from her beautiful face and gaze upon my Eve. She's so young, so pure in her deeds. I don't want her to be tainted by politics or war. Of further death.

I'm unsure if we will win in the end.

Even now, I sense adversaries more powerful than I am, waiting in the darkness.

But I have to try. I can't end up like before. I have to keep fighting for love, for her, for us, for our unborn children. "You were a badass tonight," I whisper. "You partially shifted, and I think that surprised the fuck out of the demon. But then, that's you, full of surprises."

I can almost hear her answering back, *A girl has to have a few secrets up her sleeve.*

Now it's my turn. No one will see the reclusive Acheron approaching. No one will expect an army of one to attack the SA.

Eve is a true Alpha she-wolf. I couldn't be prouder. She'll lead the pack until I return.

She'll understand. I'm solitary in my actions and decisions. She's told me she fell in love with me because I'm flawed. It's my job to destroy threats to my pack. Right now, the SA is the greatest threat of all.

I press my lips against hers in a slow, achingly sweet kiss, and time seems to stand still, even as she responds to my kiss

in her dreams. Our union fills with a sense of purpose to remain two bodies, one soul.

An intoxicating sensation of being alive.

But I'm reminded that our journey is far from over. In the morning, I go to war.

CHAPTER 19



Eve

I don't believe that love is an illusion and happiness is fleeting, but I am convinced that to have both I must fight for it. I open my eyes, but Acheron is no longer lying beside me. No longer is a love story rolling across my screen. No longer does buttered popcorn flutter from its steaming kettle. Nor does the glow of the pizza oven light up the theater room. In fact, as I toss off the blanket and an ominous feeling, I spot a stack of fresh clothes, including my favorite jeans and the mohair sweater and undershirt I often wear. I should feel calmed by this, but my tummy twists with nerves even though he's thought of everything. "He's laid out clothes for me..."

Acheron is fighting for us. He keeps surprising me, and my cheeks heat. I'm so in love with him, I find it overwhelming as I get dressed, the worn material wrapping me in a hug.

Rap. Rap. Rap.

The solid pounding upstairs on the ground floor door shakes me free of my musings.

A second later, the pounding resounds again.

Why isn't Acheron getting the door?

I take a moment, sending out mental feelers in search of Eron. He's close. Maybe in the shower...

I take a last look at myself in the mirrored wall behind the snack center. My hair is a nest of tangles that I'll deal with as soon as I can. But first I need to get to the door before whoever is knocking cracks the wood.

The path upstairs and down the hall takes me less than a minute, but I stand on the other side of the door, frozen in thought. What kind of monster wakes a person up at six a.m. on a Sunday morning?

A demon or vamp isn't going to knock, silly.

With a deep inhale, I open the door.

"Eve. So, it's true." Gunner glares, his tatted arms folded across his body.

His cold eyes are not unexpected. I can't deny that I've taken a mate. I won't deny my choices or the man that I've fallen for. "Yes. Acheron and I are mated."

He presses the door with his knee and slaps his palm on the upper panel. "Where is that bastard? I have words."

Before I can stop Gunner from entering, before I can scream, he's locked his clawed hand around my throat and lifted me so my feet dangle three feet off the ground.

I grip his wrist, clawing with all my might to get him to let go. I kick out, missing him completely. Gunner is a big bully, but Acheron is going to put him in his place. "He'll kill you," I manage through gritted teeth.

"He's not here. Saw him slip out back, mount his bike, and sail out of here five minutes ago. He's left you, you little jezebel."

I don't know if it's his squeezing or slang accusation, but my eyes leak a warm stream down my cheeks. Left me? No, Eron wouldn't do that. He couldn't. That's not his way to deceive me by running the shower...

Only as Gunner spins me around, I catch a glimpse of the woman in the paintings on the stairway wall. Her eyes are empty, hungry, and full of longing. I can only imagine she's Tasha, once again. Acheron left her at some point. Now here I am, the naive mate who's in love with a man who chooses to go through life alone or run when the going gets tough.

No. I try to shake my head in denial, but Gunner only tightens his hold.

He didn't ask you about the theater room. He decided for you. He stole your choices.

Is this another clue behind his and Tasha's strained relations, a precursor to mine, or am I being paranoid?

I shake it all away, but I can't shake Gunner's threatening look of betrayal, not his building rage, not his murderous hold on my throat. *Acheron, help me. Please, come back. Help me. We can work together. We're a team. We fight together. We win together.* "Let's talk," I rasp.

"Time for talking is over. Acheron thinks he can take a second mate while denying me. He risks the SA coming here and slaying all of us. How about I one-up him, kill you, and play the hero for once by protecting the pack instead of endangering it? I don't know what you see in him. He's nothing but a coward. I heard he couldn't keep his first wife from dying, and he's damn sure left you vulnerable with vamps and who-knows-what creeping around the forest."

A shadow crawls over us, and a beastly growl shakes the sheetrock from the walls. I have a moment to think Hades returned, but then the scent of buttered popcorn wafts through the air. "You fucking ready to die, Gunner."

The man whips around, taking me with him, and my legs sail behind me. When we spot Acheron in his wolfman form, the ground rushes up, and I land with a smack on the floor, knocking my chin hard enough to rattle my teeth.

I break into a coughing fit. Acheron checks me, and I give him a nod, signifying I'm okay.

He pounces on Gunner, taking the man to the ground and chomping into the flesh at his shoulder, marking him—not in the same way he marked me, this is violent shaking and tearing of flesh. This is the mark of an Alpha exposing his wayward wolf for everyone to see. It's a mark of shame, and from now until Gunner's end he'll be known as a traitor.

Gunner howls and clutches his shoulder, a ravaged tendon shining white through the flesh.

“If you ever touch my mate again, I'll bury you so far underground that not even the worms or roots will restore your spirit.” Acheron lands a booted foot into Gunner's ribs, earning a second howl from the man. “Now, get out of my house. Get off my compound. If I see you again—”

“No.” I rasp and pull to my feet, using the wall as balance. I agree that Gunner should be punished and labeled. I've seen him push others before. He might have killed me if Acheron hadn't rescued me. “I don't forgive Gunner. He's always been quick to anger and even quicker to attack. But I've seen him in town a time or two. He visits the bar on the outskirts of town—a shady bar with even shadier shifters. But the woman he meets is the kindest, most loving woman I know. She's pure sunshine in grumpy Gunner's world. If Mamma Jean sees worth in him, if she cares for him, even loves him, then there must be truth to her feelings. He's protecting her by keeping their relationship on the down-low. And if I'm fighting for our love, I'm fighting for theirs.”

Acheron gouges his hair with nailed claws, leaving parted rows. “Eve, I won't allow anyone to come after my mate without repercussions.”

I glance at the man's shoulder, slowly healing, but it will take a couple of painful shifts before he's healed his flesh.

Never to the point where that scar won't show. "Acheron, I won't have hypocrisy in this house. Nor in the pack. Gunner is part of our family. He fights alongside us. Can you blame him for being scared? He has taken a second mate, or he wants to. We're the ones he is afraid of, and he thought you abandoned us, so he saw a path to save our pack. He isn't wrong, only wrong in how he went about it."

Acheron lifts his lip over his canines in warning before dropping them and addressing Gunner. "I'm the leader. I'm protecting all of us. I don't need to explain my coming or goings."

While Acheron explains pack hierarchy, I rub my neck, feeling the welts left by Gunner's hands and his fingers' indentations. Gunner took the first opportunity to come at me, knowing Acheron was away. He may come at me again. But... "If I can convince Gunner to fight with us—and there must be more like us—we may have a chance to destroy the SA."

Acheron scratches his day-old beard. "He's a turned wolf. No SA agent will have his kind under their radar, which we could use to our advantage."

I stroll to my mate, watching him as his features calm to reveal my lover. "I know why you left this morning. I know you feel like you must do everything on your own to protect me and this pack, but we are all fighting for the same thing: to be with the one person who makes our time on this earth tolerable, pleasurable, livable, like you have made a life for me."

Gunner stands, clutching his arm that hangs as if his collarbone snapped. "All this may be true, but it won't stop the SA from showing up. You've put all of us in danger. There is no hiding your new form. You've been reborn. Maybe you should have kept riding. Step down and allow your Second to take your place. Or surrender to the SA before they show up."

If you really want to save your mate, you'll walk away before she ends up like Tasha.”

Eron's face twitches, and the tension thickens the air.

“Stop it!” I dive between both men, placing one hand on Acheron's chest and the other on Gunner's good shoulder. I hate to cry. It's the one thing that irks me, my body's response to tension between those I care about. But someone has to make decisions that benefit the entire pack, and, if I'm not asking too much, all shifters in existence who are suffering because they aren't allowed to take a second mate. “Can't you see we need each other and not all this pettiness?”

My intentions must seep into the players because Gunner submissively backs away from Acheron. It's the bow at the end that proves Gunner is on board with our rough plan.

“Gunner, if you know of others, please talk to them. Defeating the SA is the only way any of us can find what we've been searching for.” I think back to the vampires and demon war, two types of paranormals going at each other for power, for glory, or could it be over the love of a woman? Like the Trojan War, the local battle of the Sicilian third crusade, and even the rumored reasoning behind World War I.

Gunner doesn't turn his back to Acheron as he exits, but he keeps his head bowed. I don't know if the man will come at me again, but I have Acheron home. “In another world, I would be pissed at you for leaving without even a hint of a good-bye or a note. For allowing the shower to run as if you were inside.”

“About that—”

“I don't want excuses from you. I know you, Eron. I know you with my whole soul. As I see it, if it's not Gunner coming at us, it will be someone else. I don't want to step on your toes, going all packmaster on your pack, but they need to know we have a plan. And I think yours was a good one—one-sided, but

worthy. We both have to face the SA before they come here. Either that, or we could lose everyone and everything we love.”

“You’re young, rash. You don’t know what the SA will do to you, but I do. I won’t allow you to be punished or brainwashed into forgetting me.” He balls his fist, his neck flushing.

His *rash* comment is a slap to the face. But he’s right. I have made decisions that led to me being kidnapped, which resulted in PTSD. I’ve basically lived as a recluse for the past year. And it sucks like a Hoover on steroids pretending that I’m okay when I’m not.

But I feel myself being tugged into action, into leading this pack, into standing up for what’s right. As my father used to tell me, tyranny keeps people ignorant by keeping them scared, keeping them subdued. Screw that. I won’t let my inner phantom fears hold me back from the truth and steal my freedom. “I need to see the SA for myself and how they plan to destroy us. Only through knowledge can I find their weaknesses to use against them. But first, let’s put the theater room to good use.”

While Eron makes calls, I prepare for a pack meeting, hoping I’m brave enough when the time comes to face the SA.

CHAPTER 20



Acheron

“Sometimes shit goes wrong in life and no one is to blame.” I brush my arm against Eve’s, her touch soothing me, as I try to reassure *her* we’ll be okay. But the huffs and gasps echoing inside the theater room as my pack enters reeks of fear, and their glowers of blame.

“This doesn’t look good for us, Eron.”

I dive into her mind, choosing to keep our conversation to ourselves. *“They have every right to pull the victim card. I made the choice to take you as my mate, disregarding my pack and the laws that govern our kind. I’m the only one who can fix what I’ve done. If I’m lucky, I’ll earn their trust back in the process.”*

“You’re not the only one in our pack who’s broken a SA rule.” Eve gazes up at me, her lips forming a tight, pink line. *“I’m equally at fault, which is why we need to focus our energy on fixing the broken system.”*

I escort us to a quieter corner of the room. *“That may be true, but the SA has eyes everywhere, and they’re not going to buckle under our pressure. No. It would take an uprising of epic proportions to get the Master to buckle. Even then, I doubt Aldo would fall.”*

Eve sighs. “There has to be a way to protect our pack and get the SA to hear us out.”

“If I do anything in the next hour, I have to turn my pack’s fears into the will to fight. To make each and every one of my pack a comeback kid in their own right. I plan to do that by proving I’m the leader that will take them into the next generation where no one is punished for who they love.”

“It’s an honorable task, but not an easy one.” Eve peers over her shoulder as the pack settles into their seats. “Will you tell them about the demon and Ben?”

I’d almost forgotten about the demon in Ben’s skin. Almost. “No one knows about the demon we killed. I plan to keep it that way. I’m heading to talk to Ben now.”

Eve raises her arms, showing me the gooseflesh. “I can feel their negative reactions vibrating off my skin like the prick of claws. What should I do to help them settle?”

I rub her arms, smoothing out the tension. “I don’t know if anything will work but time. No one likes the choices I delivered to them by mating you. But the first order of business is Ben, even if challenging the potential demon-in-Ben’s-clothing feels like flirting with disaster.”

She squeezes my arm. “I trust you know what you’re doing. I’m right here if you need me.”

With that, I target the man standing at the back of the room, one hand tucked into his jacket pocket, as if the three of us hadn’t brawled last night. I plan to find out what the fuck he knows without him suspecting me creeping up on him before I call the meeting to order. Because I’m not about to allow one more person to come at me or my woman if I can stop them.

Where Ben is over six feet tall, I blend into the crowd, darting between those who hold up the perimeter, until I come from behind Ben. I scent the air, coming away with a dash of

spiced cologne instead of sulfur, but I keep my wits and ready for him to come at me.

I push out my wolf, forming claws at the ends of my fingertips.

Before Ben can suck in a breath of surprise, I've pierced the back of his neck and escorted him to my office. "Tell me you don't have an arrangement with the demons, and I'll think about setting you free."

Blood drains from his face, leaving an ashen tone. "A what? I came here for Eve at your request. What the fuck is going on?"

His shifter blood speaks to my wolf more than his words. Retracting my claws, I set the man free. "We had an impersonator last night. Which means if a demon can take the form of someone without killing them, we can't trust anyone."

"You can trust me." He rubs the space behind his neck. "But maybe next time, try asking instead of violence. I can shift at will to prove I'm a shifter. Demons need to recharge before they can reappear in our realm and take a new form. If you killed him, or think you did, it's understandable that you would think he took my form again. You'll smell rotten eggs first. I haven't picked up a scent on anyone in the pack since the first person entered your home."

The tips of my lips curl. Ben is a good man, honest, powerful, knowledgeable, the son of an Alpha. He could have been great for Eve.

He still can...

My smirk morphs into a growl. There is no turning back from Eve. I tried this morning. I rode out toward the SA with every intention of turning myself in to save her.

I didn't make it out the front gates, and the fact that she weakens me is going to get us all killed. "I need you to do me

a favor.”

“Of course, anything.”

I lean in and whisper my demand, noting the man doesn't flinch.

But my stomach rolls. If shit goes down with the pack, I need someone to look after Eve. Right now, I need someone on our side and trustworthy. “While I'm talking, do some reconnaissance. Check my men. Don't confront them head on or we'll have a fight on our hands. Do it covertly. A second glance.”

“You want me, an outsider, to approach your Alphas to verify if they're shifters or this demon you suspect one of them is housing.”

I pull Ben close, tugging at his shirt. “I believe Eve and I killed the demon that attacked us last night. I don't know what it wanted, not really. But it threatened us. If you find one hiding among us, act swiftly and alert me after it's done.”

Ben tosses his hands up and takes a defensive pose. “Whoa, whoa. You want me to murder one of your men if I suspect they're a demon? Have you lost your mind?”

Have I? I release the male's shirt. “I'm swimming in mating hormones. I've taken a second mate, who was attacked by Gunner this morning. I'm ready to not only hand her off to you, but to die protecting her and what we've built. So, maybe. Maybe I've lost it. Or maybe I've found something to fight for. Timber Cove is heaven on earth. We are thriving. It's my position as packmaster to ensure their safety, but I also need them on the same page, ready to fortify our walls instead of running—”

The crash of metal on metal sends both of us racing to the meeting room, and Gunner grips the microphone. He raps it three times. “Is this thing on?”

Gunner's actions are so out of line that I think *he's* possessed. "What are you doing?"

He tears his shirt off his body, the strip of red cloth sinking to the white marble floor. "This is what your packmaster will do to you if you cross him for doing the same thing he's doing right now—slowly killing us. He took a second mate. The SA will fall upon us and slaughter us all."

Eve is at my side, her eyes hungry for answers.

Answers I don't have. "I should have killed him for hurting you."

She rubs the red marks encircling her neck. "We have to leave. Now. This isn't right. This isn't what I wanted."

The best laid plans often go awry. Robert Burns said it best, but it applies. I stalk Gunner, but when I get to him, I give pause. What will my pack think of me if I strike him again? "Look at Eve's throat. I punished Gunner when I caught him with his hands around my mate's neck, trying to kill her."

Maxon comes to stand beside me. "Our packmaster letting him live is testament to his control as a leader."

"Of course you'd see it his way. You're Second and have your nose so far up Acheron's ass it's pathetic," Gunner spats.

Maxon crowds turned wolf. "The only one who's pathetic is you. If you have problems with the man, you don't attack his mate."

"A mate he shouldn't have."

The murmurs fall silent as the tension in the room builds. We're all feeling it, and they're waiting for me to act. But, for the first time in my life since being groomed to become a packmaster, I'm lost.

Eve strokes my arm, bringing me around. She takes the microphone from me. “The vampires who attacked us are no more. There could be other types of paranormal who may come at us again. This is a given. It’s always been this way for our kind, outside forces trying to tear us apart out of ignorance and fear. What I don’t want is for us to tear at each other. We need to stick together.”

“You say that now, but look at the position you’ve put us in,” Gunner spits.

“Eve’s right.” I take the mic from her and lift it to my lips. “Which is why I’m putting Maxon in charge of the pack. Eve will stay here, and I will speak with the SA. I’m the one at fault. I knew better, but our mating instincts rule our kind.”

“Acheron, no.” Eve stares up at me, her eyes pooling with water.

I delve into her mind. *“I should have kept riding this morning. I didn’t get out of our driveway. It’s you. It’s always going to be you, but I have to go to the SA before they come here. Or I fear none of us will survive.”*

“Take me with you. You don’t have to go this alone, even if that’s your way. All of us can fight together.” She takes my hand, putting it to her lower belly.

And I know that I will live on in her, through her. I can sense my seed growing, my bloodline insured for the next generation. She is safe. Her life is no longer cursed.

Except by my admission. I’ve cursed her by mating her. I’ve cursed all of us.

One by one, each member of my pack moves behind Maxon. I don’t expect it. Yet I do. I’ve betrayed them at the deepest level, and their actions are clear.

Their haunting gazes beg me to leave the pack.

Even my Alphas silently plead with their families at their sides to fix this disaster I've brought upon them.

I never thought I'd be kicked out of my own pack, but I brought the silent mutiny upon myself. Myself and my perfect, fated mate.

I give Eve's hand a final squeeze. I know she'll follow me. I know she'll think she can stop me from leaving this time. But I'm saving her life. She's my mate. My sacrifice is the only way I can save her. I won't let her die like I did Tasha, if there's a chance I can convince the SA that I preyed upon her innocence and ignorance. I only hope I'll survive the SA and be the one to return, transformed.

CHAPTER 21



Eve

They say a person dies when he doesn't stand up for what is right. But my pack is alive and standing idle, watching Acheron blow past me like he's a scapegoat who'll take their punishment easily. Well, obviously, the ones who have taken second mates behind Acheron's back are acting like he owes them. There's a whole lot of hypocrisy going on, and I plan to stop it. I trot after Acheron, grab his arm, but he shakes me off. "You have to come back. Talk to me."

"I have to do this, Eve, and you know it. Now go back inside where it's safer."

I march alongside him, quickening my step to match his hurried pace as he winds around the flagstones set in the landscaping. "If you believe we'd fall under attack, why would you leave me? I'm your mate."

"That's why I have to go. I'll get you killed if I stay here. I couldn't live with myself if I caused your death and didn't try to stop the SA from targeting you as a temptress."

Temptress my ass. "Uhm, I did pursue you out to the bluff, but you were as much a temptation to me as I was to you. There's no denying our attraction to each other."

A careful smile pulls at his lips.

My throat swells with emotions. It seems like eons ago instead of a few days. I have a feeling he's one step from deciding leaving is a bad idea. I press, "You're causing my emotional death right now. Mates aren't supposed to leave. They're supposed to stick together. If you face the SA alone, you'll get yourself killed. I mean, I applaud doing the right thing, but this is a death sentence, and I can't accept it."

He rounds the front of the house where his Harley is parked, the black bike with chrome dual exhausts is about as badass of a motorcycle as anything I've seen. And it's fast enough to evade rival gangs, cops, or, God help us, the SA.

I don't want to imagine him running from anything. Acheron doesn't run. He fights.

He fights...

I swallow a painful lump, and my chest aches from the surge of anxiety. He's really doing this. He's really leaving this time, and I'm standing in his way.

He swings his leg over the leather seat and sinks down, straddling the powerhouse. "I'm not asking for your permission, Eve. Go back inside."

"Inside? Without their leader? Without my mate? And do what? The pack isn't going to listen to me." I take his face in my hands, but he wrenches free. "I don't blame anyone for fearing the unknown, or for you believing you have to kill the monster before he gets us all. The SA is seen as a shifter boogeyman. I've never seen them, but the more I notice what you keep from the pack—the responsibilities and enemies—I have to wonder what you aren't telling me about the SA."

He grumbles something indecipherable.

I feel like punching him and ball my hands, the tips of my nails carving crescents into my palms. "We killed a demon, and you didn't give it another thought. You're my mate. There

is no way I'm letting you martyr yourself, when, as far as we know, we're flying way under the SA's radar. So even if you think you're ready to battle adversity, I won't allow you to go alone."

"I'm not alone."

I wave a tired hand. "Well, I don't see anyone squeezed in on the back of your bike. So what are you saying?"

Acheron kicks at the kickstand, popping it free and taking charge of the balance. "I'm a member of the Shifter Alliance Board. I'm the one who chaired the law to make taking a second mate punishable by death. For all intents and purposes, I am the SA."

My heart sinks to my soles and, for a moment, I'm mute. Acheron knows so much about the SA because he's been instrumental in upholding their rules. He's the creator of the law we must evade if we're to survive. "Why? Acheron, why didn't you tell me about your involvement, knowing all along the harsh punishment—?"

My words are cut off by his bike that roars to life.

"You were a mistake. Nothing more." I catch a glimpse of him looking in his mirror at me as he adjusts it, but when our gazes meet, it's the tick under his eyes that assures me he's lying. He's saving. Saving me. Then he squeezes the clutch, engages the engine, and races off.

He speeds away with unanswered questions—and my heart. Why didn't he take me? Why didn't he tell me? I'm as much to blame for mating him as he is me. Does he think him leaving does anything to change my feelings for him and our connection? He is my world. He has been since I was eighteen. I'm certain I'm the reason he's sacrificing himself.

But though these are hard facts, anger twists my stomach. I'm not a mistake. That's only the hurtful thing he's saying so I

won't come after him.

I've read this kind of faux rejection in hundreds of romance books and movies.

But what I can't understand is why he would agree to creating such a law.

Tasha. He blamed himself for her death. He believed he didn't deserve another mate. If he couldn't have one, then no one would.

Red taillights are the last thing I see before his presence is a blur. Hot tears roll down my cheeks a second before my legs give out.

"I got you, Eve."

I'm hauled up to chest level and catch a whiff of spice—Ben. I don't need to look up at him to know Acheron has placed his pawns around me. Not just any protector. Ben, the only eligible bachelor I had ever considered as a potential mate once upon a time. He's kind and bold. Strong. Brave. Ruggedly handsome. An Alpha. His brother is my best friend's husband and packmaster of the Craters of the Moon pack.

Even as Ben is comforting me, I crave Acheron's control and strength. I crave his dominance over me. Even if I'm pissed at him for keeping this information from me. But maybe that's why he left me. I'm too submissive. Too naive. Inexperienced in the ways of pack politics and hierarchy. Even though I fought beside him, he still sees me as rash.

A mistake.

I squirm out of Ben's grasp and swat at my tears. I have no idea how to turn this around. But I understand one thing. I'm an Alpha's mate. An Alpha of all Alphas of our pack. If I don't show strength, I'll lose all respect. I can't have anyone disrespecting me. "Thank you, Ben. I should have seen it coming..."

“It’s my duty to take care of you, ma’am.”

I glare up at him. He may be an Alpha, but no one is attracted to a puppy dog or a yes man, just saying. “I think it’s about time I took care of myself.”

Mind you, I have no idea what I’m doing. But I march back into the theater room, and the pack falls quiet. If anything, I have to prove to myself that I’m a leader. *Their* leader, even if the cards are stacked against me.

I wrap my fingers around the microphone, and the device shakes in my cold hands. I might be in shock, but I can deal with that later. Right after I address the pack. But as I stand there, I can’t help thinking about all that Acheron has kept from *me*. He’s on the SA board and a chaired member of the SA?

I can’t tell that to the pack, can I? I should meet with the Alphas first, shouldn’t I?

As hard as I’m finding making even one decision for others to be, I raise the mic to my lips. “The meeting is tabled for now. I’d like to meet with Acheron’s court privately. After, we will reconvene, and you’ll be notified of any decisions that affect you. In the meantime, be vigilant of your surroundings. There is a vampire-demon war going on in the background. Stay on guard.”

They sling questions and blame me. I expect the blame. I take a stab at the questions. “The SA rules are stupid and archaic. We all see how our world has drastically changed in the past twenty years. Then, shifters were beasts of nightmares and Hollywood cinematography. Many of us still choose to hide what we are. Acheron has held tight to hiding. He’s designed the compound to keep out curious passersby. Up until a few days ago, we all felt safe here. The vampire attack to steal shifter virgins for their blood is still in the background. Others could come at us. But it isn’t vamps that scare me. It’s

our passivity and allowing tyranny to steal our future. I vow to fight against the SA. If I have to, I'll search far and wide to come up with enough second-chance mated couples to fight them.”

Maxon and Ben flank me.

I feel support from them as they brush my arms. Others keep their heads bowed and their lips sealed, some feigning to appreciate the containers filled with candies and confections on the wall. Maybe, like Acheron, they know more than I do about the cruel Alliance and keep their gazes pinned to sweet thoughts in lieu of the horror Acheron is heading toward. Maybe my vow to take down the SA is a nail in our coffin.

But as they file outside, their murmurs of disapproval reach my sensitive ears.

They no longer feel safe. They speak of mutiny against me. My death in exchange for a day of peace. It isn't the way I thought it would go, nor to see Gunner praised as a hero for attacking me. But I can't change their minds. Yet.

A hand on my shoulder brings me around to find Maxon and Ben. I take a strained breath when I realize only the two men are here with me. “Thank you both for staying. I thought the other Alphas might stick around.”

Maxon drops his hand. “They have young to care for. Mates who are scared. My mate understands the place you're in. She left an assigned mate to be with me. She is a brave mate. What you said was also courageous, but it could trigger someone to speak out or challenge you.”

Challenge me. “You mean *to death* for my spot.”

Maxon nods, his green gaze locking on mine. “Yes. But, like I said, what you did was brave.”

“Or stupid.” I plop into one of the reclining theater chairs, my legs feeling like lead. “Tell me, how long have both of you

known that Acheron is on the SA board of directors?”

Maxon clears his throat and Ben’s jaw drops.

“So, Maxon, you knew, which makes sense. You’re the only one who verbally supported us mating while others skirted praise.” I swivel in my seat, the new leather stiff as unyielding as I imagine Acheron will find the SA when he confronts them. “Ben, I’m sorry you’ve been drawn into this mess. I’m sorry if you feel betrayed by Acheron or myself. I would never have called you here when my heart was already another’s. It was wrong of Ach—”

“No need to apologize. I won’t be the only one to benefit if the SA is destroyed.”

My brows shoot up. It’s the first time I’ve noticed Ben and the darkness he holds behind his kind eyes. “You have a mate?”

“There is someone I would pursue if the laws change. I’m on your side, no matter what happens.”

I drop my shoulders, almost feeling relieved by his admission. I’m unsure who he’s talking about, but that’s not important now. “Why don’t the two of you come up with a list of solutions, adversaries, anything you think that could help our cause.”

The clock ticks down. When the duo are distracted, I fly from my seat and head to my bike. Stopping Acheron is the most important thing I’ll ever do. If I can reach him before he confronts the alliance and they deliver a punishment there’s no coming back from.

CHAPTER 22



Acheron

Don't try to be everywhere. I repeat the phrase as I pull into the Shifter Alliance facility and park my bike. My legs are almost numb when I dismount. After a day's ride, I still find it difficult to push thoughts of Eve into the recesses of my mind. I can't think about how I hurt her. How she must hate me. How my pack has labeled me as their greatest betrayer and thereby enemy. I have to stay focused on how I'm confronting the head of the department, Master Aldo Tamil, on how to persuade him to hear me out before he catches on to my dilemma.

If he'll see me. If he'll take time to hear me out.

I remind myself the snake-shifter isn't scent blind. His super-charged scent receptors work better than my wolf's. He's going to hone in on my mating pheromones. Once he does, either of two things will happen: He'll kill me outright or send me to the hellish prisons of my own damn creation.

I almost prefer him killing me swiftly. Especially since I was the one to develop the reassignment procedures that rarely fail. If I wasn't so set on returning to my mate, I might have a chance at fooling Aldo.

But who am I kidding. What I'm proposing is a death wish.

I scout the property, the overhead lamps casting an eerie glow over the monstrous facility that sets my senses on edge. Wails of pain radiating from the distant confines ride the wind, which only sensitive shifter ears can pick up. Sounds from punishment once brought me comfort when anguish was my closest companion. I took each strike as if they were my own.

Pain that I deserved after I failed Tasha.

Maybe it's best I'm here where I can't tarnish Eve further. Where I can't hurt her with the truth of my actions here. I approach the entrance, my muscles taut beneath my skin and my heart pounding with anticipation. I can only hope that Aldo isn't waiting to strike and that he'll hear me out before he takes me into custody.

Inside the building, I use the stairs that lead to the top floor and sniff the air when I emerge from the stairwell. Aldo is close, but I don't pick up acrid scents of his anger or fear.

I release my breath. Maybe I have a chance and have caught him off guard—

“Looking for me, Acheron?”

I spin around to see Aldo beelining toward me. Black slacks and jacket match the color of his sharp and knowing eyes.

I bow to the Shifter Alliance Master and school my response. There's no use wasting his time or mine. “I am.”

“You've come to challenge me.”

His voice commands attention and respect, though I refuse to let it rattle me. A smile teases the corner of my lips, equal parts excitement and defiance. “That's right, Aldo. I'm here to prove that the old ways are fading and admit that the laws I once clung to are wrong. It's time for a new era. New blood. A new direction.”

“You have all the answers, do you. What kind of *era* would that be, Acheron? One of chaos? Anarchy?” His expression remains unmoved, his wide forehead teasing a thin crease, and his words slice through the air like a blade.

I meet his gaze head on, determined not to reveal how much his authority shakes me. One snap of his fingers and guards would fall upon me. “Change, Aldo. Change is inevitable. The Shifter Alliance needs a leader who understands power, not just preaches unity. It needs a board that promotes compassion in lieu of punishment. It’s the only way we are to survive in this new world where we walk among humans and Other Kind.”

His eyes hold a weariness I don’t expect, a sadness that tempers my anger.

“You misunderstand, Acheron.” He clicks his forked tongue. “The Alliance isn’t about power for its own sake. It’s about protecting and preserving the most noble of our kind. We are animals first, the human facade merely a survival technique. And all animals must be ruled, tamed, our breeds held to the highest standards by the Alliance. We can’t continue to allow mongrels to run amongst us or for defectives to have a second chance at watering down our population.”

My sneer comes easily, a reflection of my frustration. Once I saw myself as defective. But my child was as pure of heart as her mother. Eve follows in their footsteps. She has my heart now. She’s carrying my baby. “How’s that working out? The Alliance has grown weak under your leadership. I suspect your involvement in sending spies to my compound.”

“Spies? If you were tested, perhaps it was a test to measure your strength as a pack that’s grown in numbers as of late, something the SA would investigate. Something we wouldn’t allow.”

I'm certain he sent those who attacked us, but I don't have proof. Still, I use my pack to demonstrate our strength. "My numbers grow because we are thriving. Without the mating law we will continue to strengthen our pack. By natural selection and fate. Not by science. As of now, the Alliance is nothing more than a cancer that controls our numbers by fear. Time and change has made us more human, and that scares you."

"Nothing scares me." He flicks his tongue.

"Keep telling yourself that. It's time for a shift, one you most certainly expect, otherwise you wouldn't have sent your minions after my mate."

He meets my challenge with a piercing gaze, and his iridescent black scales multiplying on his skin, hardening, warning me not to challenge him. "I had such high hopes for you, Acheron. But seeing the new you, the younger you, you're pathetic. Taking a second mate, how could you? You've broken one of our most sacred laws—a law you yourself lobbied for. What was your reasoning? Let me guess, to prove to your pack you're still a virile male, worthy of their respect? Or when you fail to produce, everyone will know your lineage died out the day your wife died? Everyone will know that Acheron was a lie—his leadership, his wolf, his honor. He is nothing, and so will be future offspring of this mate of yours. Suda will be no more."

I clench my fist at my sides, my anger flaring from my nostrils. I loved Tasha. I loved our child. No matter the outcome of the pregnancy and Tasha's death, they were perfect in my eyes. I don't care about my honor; I care about my mate Eve and our child. "I'm more of a leader than you'll ever be. It's clear that love isn't a crime. A miscarriage is from nature and nature is never wrong. It doesn't make me a failure as a father. What is wrong is this law we've both put on a pedestal

and allowed to rule our kind. SA rules, your rules, won't define me or control who I love and take as a mate."

"It's not just about love. It's about maintaining balance. You've disrupted that balance—a balance that must be righted." His voice remains steady, laced with chagrin.

As I open my mouth to retort, a guard steps forward, chains in hand, as per Aldo's command. I grit my teeth, glaring at the guard but allowing myself to be restrained. Chains wrap around my wrists, a harsh reminder of my current situation. My contempt for the man simmers, but I know when to pick my battles, even as I twist against the metal cutting my flesh.

"Aldo's orders," the guard mutters.

His apologetic tone does little to quell my frustration as I jerk at the cuffs. Even as I'm led away, I fix my gaze on Aldo's silhouette, his unwavering stance etched into my mind. It was all too easy for him, too bold of me to think I'd have a conversation with the man and change his distorted ideals.

I turn my gaze toward the guard. "What now? Where are you taking me?"

"So many questions for someone who once held all the answers." He opens the back of a van. "Get in."

The metal door slams shut behind me, the harsh sound echoing like a final verdict, and the driver pulls away from the facility toward the prison where the screams grow louder.

Alone in the dimness, I gnash my teeth, and my anger brews. Not that it does me much good. The concrete cell I'm tossed into smells of ammonia and rot. Green algae litters the damp walls, and movement in the dark corner catches my attention.

A man coughs, the sound like a death rattle. What remains of his clothes hangs in shreds off his broken body.

I know the rules of this hell we'll both succumb to. He can't shift to heal himself as Aldo controls the magic of this place.

I pace, my movements as restless as my thoughts, a storm of revenge. Any change that I want, my people will never see if I can't escape. But as I sit beside the dying man, as I promise him I'll set him free, even though I don't believe my own words, I realize no one can hear my prayers. No one is coming for me, that's for sure. My pack is hundreds of miles away from here. I have to save myself.

Drip, drip, drip.

The water dribbles down the wall, past the barred window that teases the moon's shifting position and casts a ghoulish shadow that dances across the dank floor.

A sweet scent, a floral essence wafts through the window...

Only it can't be Eve.

My pulse races and I spring to my feet. I might be confined, but my spirit is anything but. The fire of my challenge still burns, determined to reshape the destiny I've chosen. I lock my hands around bars and press my face between them, watching as Eve is led toward the female prison. Yes, Eve. My beautiful mate. She's here for me. We're better together.

Aldo appears and sidles up beside her, touching her shoulder, talking to her in tender tones.

My chest crushes and I crane my neck to get a better look. He knew I would come, that I was coming. I don't know when or how he intercepted Eve, but it doesn't matter now. "Eve! Eve, I'm here. Stay strong. I'm coming for you. I promise."

But as my throat turns hoarse, I hear my voice from the past circle in my head: "*Scream all you want. The more you*

do, the worse it'll be on your mate."

CHAPTER 23



Eve

In my shifter world where everyone is guilty of something, the only crime is getting caught. The Master of the Shifter Alliance, Aldo Tamil, wraps a monstrous hand around my neck. He's taller than me by a mile. I feel like a shrew as he drags me along and shares the darkest, dirtiest secrets Acheron keeps hidden about his involvement with the SA. As much as my heart is breaking, I vow that Aldo will never break me, and I set out to prove it. Leaving here without Eron isn't an option I'm willing to accept.

I get a good kick in, striking Aldo in the calf and earning a solid bellow from the fucker who's caged my mate. Aldo thinks he can strike some nerve in me about Eron's involvement in the atrocities of this place. But I know Acheron. Everything he does is to benefit others while he starves. That's just who he is.

"Stop your squirming, girl. This is for your own good. You'll see." Aldo shifts his hand from my neck to my upper arm.

He escorts me, as he's calling it, to the reassignment room. His know-it-all smirk left his face after that last kick. Bully for me. What he doesn't know is I'm not folding as easily as he thinks I am.

He doesn't know the gritty details of how my last packmaster ruled. My bestie Pepper and her brother Tavin's deceased father, Draven Ruslor, who Tavin killed, was a mean-ass bastard. After his death, we all saw freedoms we never knew existed. Freedoms I'm fighting for.

I spent more time in the pit of punishment under Draven than Tavin and Pepper combined. I know how to spend my time imprisoned. Stubborn is my middle name, and my sweet face and doe-eyed gaze can woo just about anyone into believing I've repented. I'm just hoping my tactics don't get me killed before I rescue Eron.

"Here we are..." Aldo opens the door and guides me inside.

The sterile whiteness of the room assaults my senses as soon as I step through the door. I expected four concrete walls, rusted bars, dank quarters, the stench of death, like where they're keeping my mate.

Aldo thought parading me in front of the prison would drive Eron mad, get him to abjure me, or tame him into submission. Good luck with that. We are mated soul-deep, both of us hardened in our own ways. No matter what Aldo does to me, he'll never brainwash me enough to erase Eron's memory.

"Take a seat. Our lessons begin now." Aldo slaps a book in front of me, the sound rattling the student desk-seat combo, and adds a purple crayon.

I tense and my heart races as if it wants to escape the impending doom that lies ahead. If only I could stab him, I would, but a crayon won't do much damage. Still, I visually peruse the room, keeping a watchful eye for other tools I can use to inflict damage to the man.

He leans against the desk beside me, the spacing between his snake-like eyes almost too wide.

What is he? Definitely a viper of some sort... I've never seen the man, but his returned smirk is a reminder that he's in control of my freedom. Whatever he has planned for me, I'll have to endure if I want to escape this place alive.

He pushes off from the desk, kneels beside me, and places his hand on the book, as if it holds all the answers to my survival.

It's more of a journal, blank lined pages filling up the half-inch space between the covers when he cracks it open and flashes the insides. But it's not the journal that surprises me; it's how his features soften when he stares down at me.

"I'm sorry Acheron preyed upon you, Eve. No one deserves that."

Is it regret I'm hearing in his tone? Does he actually believe Eron hunted and ensnared me? Took advantage of me in some way?

My palms turn clammy, and I fidget with the hem of my sweater. The more he bores his gaze into me, the more I squirm against the stiff leather chair that is as unrelenting as his focus.

I try to avoid looking at him, finding the clock at the front of the room hanging above the white board. Its constant ticking fills the air and is a reminder that time is slipping away, leaving me with no choice but to face the inevitable. Whatever that is.

Suddenly, I don't know which way to play this game. If I come off as too willing to reform, he'll get suspicious. Maybe defending my mate for a while is my best option. For now. "He didn't prey on me. We are in love."

"Love." Aldo hisses, the sound sending shivers down my neck. "Child, you're ruled by your breeding hormones. Your packmaster has schooled himself around hundreds of

breeding-aged females. He sought you out, sure. You, my dear, didn't have a parent to guide and protect her. Can't you see that Acheron took on those roles after your parents died. He knew your history, your innocence, what you needed, and he coveted that for himself by pretending to be the perfect mate. Acheron plotted, he planned, he played you like a pup with a bone."

Everything he's saying he's twisting. I mean, I see Aldo's point, but I don't have to accept it. I don't have to like it. But could it be true?

No, I tell myself firmly. This is Aldo's game. He's trying to turn me against my mate. "That's not true. Acheron resisted me for years."

"He had nothing but time, and that was his game. He's obsessed with power and abusing it. Abusing you. I bet he gave you all the material things you needed while he groomed you to be his next victim. Your home, your furnishings, your clothes, your bike, your dream job as medic for your chapter. Classic love bombing."

He's listing all the things, as if he's been inside my head and home, and my heart is old paint, bits peeling and chipping each time he spells out Acheron's crimes. This is the way of a predator, only it's not Aldo who is the bad guy in the story; it's Acheron.

My pulse sounds like it's trapped in a tunnel between my ears, and panic sets it. Acheron loves me. He isn't some textbook narcissist. "No," I say breathily. "Eron loves me as his true mate. When you care about someone, you see their needs met."

"The only one Acheron fulfilled was himself. Just like he did with Tasha. He waited, he planned, and when she became pregnant, he came here, leaving her to fend for herself. That he found her on the verge of death was a bonus. He's obsessed

with playing the hero, but he doesn't want any of the responsibilities other than power and control."

I think back to the woman in the pictures hanging in Acheron's stairway. She's so sad, yearning for someone to save her. But where was Eron? Is what Aldo's telling me true? "No, I don't believe what you're saying. Acheron was a new packmaster. He wrestled with balance between family and responsibilities to his pack. I have complete empathy for him, and his wife and child's unfortunate demise is a common outcome among she-wolves."

I don't want to believe what Aldo's saying. I can't. Because if I do, then it's plausible that Acheron doesn't really love me and used me to complete some twisted goal of his. I have to keep my wits. Aldo is playing us against each other. I can only imagine what the Master is telling Acheron about mating me...

Aldo inches closer to my face, slathering it with his day-old mouse breath, and I glance away.

He pulls back an inch. "And then, when you were ripe for the taking, he plucked you right off the tree in his very backyard."

I'm mid gape when the door opens, and a nurse enters. She's wearing a white top and skirt, her legs covered in white stockings all the way to her white support shoes. Strangely, she wears the same infuriatingly calm smile Aldo wears. It's as if they both know something I don't. As if they can see into the deepest corners of my mind and are amused by my struggles.

"Good afternoon, Eve," she says, her voice smooth and soothing. "I'm Laurel, and I'll be working with you until you understand how toxic your relationship is with your elder. I promise, you'll be free of him in a few weeks."

Free? Weeks? I grit my teeth, refusing to let her words disarm me. I can't be here for weeks. I mean, I stayed in the pit for a week once, starved, alone, cold. But more than a few days of this torture, how will I survive?

My wolf claws at my insides, but something is holding her back, keeping her locked inside me. Maybe this is how they do it—trying to lull me into a sense of security so “Nurse Ratched” can pry into my thoughts, my emotions, my weaknesses, until I'm so subdued, I'm near death.

I sit taller, defiance rising up in my throat. “I'd like you to try and keep me here.”

Aldo steps into my view. “Eve, after we've debriefed you, you won't want to leave. It's safe here. We care about you. I care about you. I only want you to see your self worth. Acheron isn't good for you. No predator is worth dying for.”

Aldo makes his way to the door, leaving me with Laurel.

But as I stare at her, I realize how much she looks like Aradia and Tasha, as if they've planned it this way. Did Tasha die so Aradia could exist? There has to be a reason why Acheron and I have to go through this ring of insanity if we're to find our way back to each other, like Aradia found her way back to Hades.

“You're weak, dear. Why don't I take you to your bunk where you can rest and reflect. We'll start fresh tomorrow.” Laurel leads me out of the classroom and toward barracks. I sense each door leading off the long hallway houses groups of other women like me. But as I catch a howl in the distance, my mind turns to my mate and my weakness for him.

What are they doing to him? What lies are they telling him about me? I don't think they're taking the scientific route in the men's prison, unless it involves severing limbs and dissection.

I gulp down vomit as the nurse leads me inside, where my mental agony tries to tear me down. I wish I'd listened to Acheron and avoided capture. I wish I hadn't ditched Ben and Maxon. But I'm a rash, stupid creature who's running on hormones and love.

Laurel unlocks a door that opens up to one large room. At least twenty bunk beds line the walls. "We're sure to get you fixed in no time..."

I don't know how long it'll take before I'm "fixed," but I telepathically reach out to Acheron. Even when I don't feel him on the other end, I press out my feelers to their limits. The conditions he's in are horrendous, a prison of his own design, I'm told. A place of punishment and death and where self-blame goes to perish, and no one cares if you live or die. But I do. *"I'm coming for you. I don't care what they do to me. I'll never stop searching for you. I love you. Please, don't give up on us. Don't get yourself killed..."*

CHAPTER 24



Acheron

Don't get yourself killed... Death isn't always physical. I feel the loss of Eve to my marrow. Missing her keeps me awake at night while hunger pains shred my insides. Every week, every hour, every step toward the ring where I fight for food and survival, I do for her. I fight for a chance that she may walk out of this place with our baby and live a full life.

Because here, what I had in the past is dead. I'll never be the Alpha of my pack. I'll never lead my MC. Imprisoned, I'll never be more than a number, hated, seen as the enemy deserving of his own punishments. The ideals I once held close are dust in this place. I know how wrong I was in my thinking now.

Aldo comes within a foot of my ringside enclosure. "Eve thrives without you, Acheron."

The snake must sense my melancholy as he twists the proverbial knife, a pain I'm feeling deep in my heart. "She thrives is what matters."

The corner of Aldo's mouth ticks. "She's met friends you denied her. She's eager for support from mentors and a chance to work in the kitchen. Without you, she is so much more..."

A growl rises in my throat. Everything precious to me has been snatched away. But I was wrong about the value of the

SA. How could I have associated with the Master? How could I have looked up to him and coveted his ideals as if they were my own, knowing he'd use them against me?

A grin spreads across Aldo's lips when the single loaf of bread is placed outside the caged fighting ring.

My mouth waters at the sight of it, the irregular shape as imperfect as I am. But I don't dare complain. Every morsel feeds me, keeps me clinging to this hell I call life.

A floral scent wafts through the air.

I inhale again, confirming that Eve, my sweet mate, touched the very bread I'm fighting for. Does she know she's feeding me? Does she know how much I thirst to touch her, to tell her it's okay if she moves on without me. She's a strong woman and a natural leader. She'll be an amazing mother. She'll be okay.

The sooner she forgets you the better.

I can almost hear Aldo's thoughts as my opponent is led into the ring.

He's a burly male, and a flicker of familiarity runs through my mind. Yet, he is skin on bones. He's been here longer than a month, fighting to stay alive when doing so is nearly pointless. Rarely do males leave this prison alive.

You're the nail in their coffin. Aldo will be yours.

My self-loathing returns. Bad men yearn for power. I was once that man. I deserve to be here for more than taking a second mate.

But this man... What are his crimes? Love? A will to live another day and to see his mate again? His children?

"This might be your last fight, Brek," Aldo spits.

Aldo is truly the evil one. He's moved by injustice as he takes a ringside seat. There is no way this shifter will beat me.

But evident from his lacework of scars, he will try.

In Aldo's sneer of pleasure, he will celebrate when either of us falls. That's a given.

"You're going down, traitor," Brek threatens through a fit of coughs.

Down is where I belong after what I did to Eve. Still, I can't give up hope to reunite with her, even if I don't deserve her. Hope is all I cling to. It's keeping me alive. If only I had a glimpse of her... Only in my dreams.

I crack my knuckles and stretch my neck, hearing it pop, but not enough to release tension. He's not going down easily, but neither am I. I'm fighting for him even if he's unaware. "Cockiness is what landed you here, Brek. Best you lay down and let them carry you out for another day."

"Fuck you, Suda," the brute growls. "You're to blame for all of this..."

He's not all wrong. From this side of the cage, behind the reinforced walls of the prison, nothing is promised. There are those here who know me, know what I've stood for, and plot my death. Besides the man in my cell, I have only enemies who wish for my death.

A jab from a baton knocks me out of my pen and into the ring. "Let's see how the Master's pet fairs fighting for a hunk of stale bread."

Hunger rises inside me and my heart pounds like a war drum. It's just like Aldo inviting the guards to witness the brutal showdown I no doubt will face. I lift my fists and circle the man, both of our lives hinging on the extra food ration, and I don't wait for a staredown contest as I throw the first punch.

The scarred man briefly winces, but he glares at me with cold, calculating eyes. I've seen Brek brawling before as I study his features, that blurry sense of familiarity coming into

focus from times I visited his state of Texas as well as the last time I observed the fighting arena. He's an Alpha werewolf like me. He's known throughout the prison as a ruthless fighter and a stablemate of Aldo's. Or he was.

In the free world, he has nothing on my reputation, and, for a brief second, I use that knowledge to my advantage. I step into his punch, allowing the hit to knock me backward, to even the playing field and earn applause.

A spray of red splatters the audience, silencing them.

Aldo wipes my blood off his face, and I promise myself it won't be the last time.

I jab Brek once, twice, and a third time, feeling his nose give way under my force as he howls. With a final punch, Brek is KO'd, but my fight has just begun. I know how this fight for food is played.

"Bring another!" Aldo orders.

The guards' murmurs fade into a hushed silence as they haul another into the room.

The game isn't over. Aldo didn't get his fill of suffering and death.

But he will. It's a promise I carve into my mind. I have to find a way out of this prison of death.

A freshly acquired shifter enters the ring, his dark gaze set to kill me. He's new here, bolder, wiry, hungry.

He could be my new hope.

I don't care who I have to fight, as long as Eve lives.

The signal to begin rings out.

I steel myself, calming the adrenaline raging within me. I can't afford to lose as fast as poor Brek, but Brek doesn't

know what I've done for him. Not yet. Both he and Eve depend on me to stay alive.

With a sudden burst of speed, the new man lunges at me, his massive fists swinging wildly.

I jump to the side, narrowly avoiding a blow that could obliterate my jaw. I can't match his fresh power, so I rely on my agility, quick reflexes, and experience to stay one step ahead.

I jab at the shifter's ribs, hoping to weaken him before he can land a crippling blow.

Quick to counter, he blocks my strike with his forearm and retaliates with a vicious uppercut that connects with my chin.

Pain shoots through my face, and my legs weaken, but I stiffen them to boards. This is for Eve. This is to prove to Aldo that I'm not going down without one hell of a fight.

We trade a slew of body blows, each strike accompanied by a chorus of cheers and gasps from the guards. My ribs ache with every breath, but I won't allow the pain to slow me down. I have to keep moving, keep fighting, if I want to win.

But maybe winning will be my fatal flaw. I have only enemies here. What if I could join us to revolt against Aldo and his guards?

Somehow...

The more I dance, the slower his steps get, as if I'm wearing him down in the waltz for our survival. When he's staggering, I get another hit in, bruising his face and momentarily disorienting him.

But then an idea strikes me. How can my adversary become my friend? How do I create an alliance with him like the one I had with Hades?

I don't know how many battles I have left in me. I'm soon to wind up like Brek, unconscious and hauled out by my ankles. Or my dying cellmate.

But this man is still in his prime.

While the guards' applause grows louder, hope surges within me. I pull the man to me and lock my arms around him, holding him up with my remaining strength. "We don't have much time. The next hit you throw, I'm going down. You take the bread. You feed the weak and dying. You be the hero and spread the word to be ready for an uprising. It's the only way we'll break out of this living hell if we pool our strengths."

"Name's Mule." He pushes me off. Then, with a fierce roar, he unleashes a flurry of blows.

Each punch feels like a sledgehammer to my already-broken ribs, and I stagger back, gulping for breath, my vision swimming. My wolf, though he's trapped inside me, refuses to fall. It's not his way. He's Alpha and he won't bend a knee.

Mule sees his opportunity, landing a devastating blow to my midsection.

The sickening crunch of my breaking bones echoes in the confines.

I cry out in agony and collapse to the ground, clutching my injured ribs, my world spinning. But through the blood that trickles across my eyes, I lock my gaze on Mule's, and he subtly nods as he carries off the bread that Eve made for me.

Seconds later, all I see is black.

CHAPTER 25



Eve

After weeks of good behavior, I land a private room. It's taken long hours working in the kitchen, but I'm healthy. Most of the time. Better than I sense Eron is doing. I feel his pain transcend space, but that tells me he's battling to stay alive. His continued survival is what I'm fighting for, and I found a way...

“Perks like this are what can happen if you follow the rules.” Laurel waves a manicured hand, showcasing the new prison cell.

The studio is much nicer than the barracks I shared with the other women. There's a bathroom and a small kitchen off to the side. No oven or stove, but there's a microwave and an assortment of microwaveable food choices. I have no idea what my nurse plans to do with me or how long the SA will keep me, but my escape plan is rounding third base. I've tweaked the bread loaves delivered to the prison in hopes of strengthening the men as I'm the one placing the dough into the pans before they're baked...

“And possibly a job with us, long term, Eve. There's the central kitchen...”

If I'm a good little shifter and do as asked, I can get a job here? It's true that making bread for the masses felt like home.

“I’d like that very much. I’m a whiz in the kitchen, and my pizza crust is to die for,” I pop off too quickly.

It’s just that this Stockholm’s Syndrome they’ve been blaming for my attachment to Eron works two ways. Now, my so-called kidnapper is the SA. Everything about their treatment of me has been fair, and I’m beginning to see a future for myself that would never be available outside of the compound. It’s a way for me to see other breeds and lifestyles, a whole big world outside of what I’ve known.

But it’s a trick. The carrot they’ve dangled in my face has replaced the stick incentive. I curse the fact that it’s working because I can’t lose sight of my goal to rescue my mate, as well as save myself on the way. Maybe I can use these additional perks to my advantage. “Does the central kitchen feed the men’s side of the prison like the one I’m working in now?”

“Oh, no. It serves everyone but the prison. Would you like a tour?” Laurel’s lip ticks upward. “I’ll see about an opening in the kitchen. A good chef is always in demand. You should think about a culinary art degree once you leave here.”

She’s subdued, polite, but it feels forced. I’m not sure what’s going on, but that’s fine. My goal is to scope out this place a little more and right my bearings, hopefully in this kitchen she’s talking about has fewer guards. It could be a way to escape—a lead to the men’s prison and a means to contact Acheron. “Can I see it now?”

“Why not. Fresh air is good for the babies.”

Babies. It’s true, I’m pregnant with twins. But what’s good for my babies is their father. If I’m moved from the men’s prison, I fear he won’t receive the portion of meat scraps I’ve been able to sneak inside. Maybe the central kitchen has better quality scraps. I paste on a smile. “Whatever is best for the babies.”

Laurel hustles me out of the room and away we go on our little excursion.

I lost count of my steps a mile ago. This facility is huge. There are too many rooms and winding hallways, zero windows. It's hard to orient my position and the direction of the prison for the wolf shifters. But I look through my wolf eyes when she's not paying attention. My wolf has a built-in compass, one I trust.

Laurel pauses at a double-wide door with a pane of plastic that shows the commercial kitchen, which is twice the size of my cottage and the last prison kitchen I worked in. There's so much equipment, and the smell of fresh bread leaks out of the crack at the bottom of the door. "Impressive." I add a whistle.

Laurel gathers my arm. "I'm certain you'll become one of us in no time."

I fake a grin and my belly sours. I don't want that at all. I want my life back, maybe with a few tweaks, but mating Acheron was my dream. I won't trade it for a career for the SA. Even if, somehow, Acheron believed the SA held significance. All the bells and whistles don't change anything. I'm a prisoner.

Once the tour ends, Laurel escorts me back to my studio where I find my little space is stocked with comfort food and the refrigerator holds fresh fruit, veggies, and an assortment of drinks. I'm ravenous, but I'm too nauseous to eat.

"I'll let you rest. I'm certain you're tired after the tour."

Whether by power of suggestion or not, my eyes grow heavy and my throat dries. This entire week included calisthenics until I wore blisters on my heels. They've healed, but my feet are still tender. I think exercise is a way to break us down. I fix my gaze on the ice maker and water dispenser on the refrigerator door. "Yes. Very. Thank you for the tour."

She nods, like she's satisfied with me this far, and locks the door behind her when she leaves.

I can't launch myself to the bed quick enough after I chug a quart of iced water. My tears escape their confines, and I hate that this soon in the game, I'm breaking. I haven't cried this hard since my parents died. It's as if part of me is dying without my mate.

It's exactly the lesson I learn over the next three weeks.

Three fucking weeks split between solitary confinement and classes.

No one should depend on another to the point that they're consumed. To the point that Acheron's absence makes me feel like I'm dying or worse. Death, at this point, would be an escape from this bond of hell that Acheron and I have created.

But I keep telling myself, even when I don't want to believe it, even when my PTSD is crushing down on me, that the SA is wrong about us.

The SA is a love killer. They won't stop trying to convince me that I'm some kind of Stockholm Syndrome survivor. But I refuse to give up on a sliver of hope that Acheron is still alive, still fighting for our love, even if the metaphysical bond we once shared I've had to destroy.

So, I've made a choice to accept their reality for me. I write in my journal every day. I've graduated to a mechanical pencil. I guess if I have access to plastic knives in the kitchen, I'm trustworthy enough to use sharpened carbon.

I openly talk about my feelings of inadequacy and fears of motherhood. I discuss my future as a single mom living off-site, but still part of the SA program. I welcome graduation day when I'll walk out of here free and strong, to live my life my way without depending on anyone but myself.

Even if it's a lie.

What I had, even so briefly, was a dream come true. Yes, there were obstacles that I needed to overcome, that Eron and I needed to deal with. But without the fear of the SA, I believe we would have won over any challenge.

Laurel leans over me and touches my shoulder, and the murmurs of class fall quiet. “You’re making so much progress, Eve. I’m very proud of you, and you’ve become an exemplary student. You other girls would do well to keep your eyes on this one.”

I don’t get the fuss as I make my way to the front of the class and present my collage titled, Dreams. I raise one hand, giving the other girls a little wave, and some of them giggle at my artistic creation. Others brood in the back of the room, like I once did, unwilling to participate. “This is the nursery I’m imagining for my babies.”

As if on cue, I feel a flutter low near my pubic bone. I’m ten weeks now. It’s too early to tell the sexes, but they are thriving. I’ve barely been nauseous, just a few days. I hold up my display. “Light filters in through the windows.”

I glance at Laurel, and she gives me a nod, verifying that the off-site housing for new mothers has windows as compared to our private rooms here. “I want my babies to wake up to sunshine and a smile from me everyday.”

“You’re such a brown-noser that your snout couldn’t get any blacker,” moody girl says.

Ignoring the new girls has become an old habit, and I choose not to argue. It won’t do either of us any good. “There’s a rocking chair in the corner and one of those spongy, primary-colored mats where we can all roll around on and play with toys. Yeah, it’s beautiful.”

I’m gushing, and my cheeks heat. If it wasn’t for Acheron, I wouldn’t be pregnant and the curse that’s haunted me all my life would still be a threat. But now, our babies and our future

are exactly how I picture the attic inside Acheron's home, inside *our* home, with *our* children. We will be together, even if it's not for a little while.

“Great job. Dreams and goals can be the distraction we need while we heal,” Laurel muses, taking a seat across from me. “But it's important to remember that facing our negative feelings is equally vital. There are times when being a single mother can be daunting and exhausting. Just remember that balance and making sure we don't fall into bad habits or codependency again is what we should all strive for. For the wellbeing of our children.”

I clench my fists under the table, my nails digging into my palms. I'm not afraid of caring for my babies alone. I can do it. But the fact that the SA is determined to brainwash me into thinking that loving Eron, that raising our children together is wrong, is enough to make me—

My belly roils, and I lurch from my seat, thinking I'll make it to the nearest garbage can, but my puke has other ideas.

Laurel shoves out her hands to block the spray, a moment too late, and my cottage cheese and egg breakfast finds itself plastered all over her hair, face, shirt, and pants.

The moody girl in the back shouts, “Whoop, whoop. Way to fight back, Eve!”

Several other girls start gagging—as ninety-eight percent of us are preggo—and the room smells like soured milk, oatmeal, and sausage.

“I'm sorry,” I feign regret, wiping off Laurel with my now-sticky hands.

She jets out of the room, cursing.

It's the best damn act of revenge I've had in weeks, and I didn't even plan it. My wolf fist pumps, she's so freaking

proud of her work.

Laurel returns, her furious gaze locked on mine. She jerks me up and hauls me outside.

The light blinds me into submission. Of course, her fingers threaded through my hair help hold me in place while ripping out my strands with the roots.

My wolf is set on survival and protecting our unborn children, her low growl percolating up my throat. I manage, “Where are you taking me?”

“You want to see what happens to those who won’t conform? To your precious Acheron?”

I don’t get a chance to answer as we enter another building. This one is five stories high and smells like chlorine and antiseptic—a concoction that attempts and fails to cover up the sweet smell of death.

As the doors slam behind us, I realize this isn’t where they keep the wayward women. This is a mixture of... I sniff out a menagerie of species of the shifter kind, and then I’m led to a glassed room where I see my once-beautiful mate strapped to a stainless-steel medical table, a man with a scalpel in one hand and another with a syringe as long as my finger.

My scream turns to a howl, and my knees threaten to give out, when Acheron lifts his head and our gazes meet seconds before he passes out.

“Look at him. This is what your obstinacy earns him. Every time you disobey, he loses.”

She forces my head forward, pressing my face against the cold, hard glass, making me see that I’m to blame for Acheron’s punishment. All of it. From the first time I laid eyes on him, we were doomed.

CHAPTER 26



Acheron

Abandonment cuts deeper than the deepest cut. I walked away from my pack, and they walked away from me because I turned my back on them. It's a vicious cycle. No one is coming for me. The wheels of the gurney *click, click, click* along the path to my cell, ushering me far away from a chance at escaping and my precious Eve. Each bump, I'm left jostling in pain, left to heal when healing doesn't matter in a place like this. It's ironic how I once stood undefeated and powerful but have been reduced to this—a broken man.

To make it worse, Eve took one look at me and I broke her too.

It didn't matter that what she witnessed and what was actually happening were far from the truth. The doctors worked to fix my collapsed lung. By the grace of God, I'm breathing on my own, and I contribute my survival to Aldo.

The bastard.

I don't want to give him credit for saving my life. But I know why he's keeping me alive. Fight after fight. Win after defeat. Defeat after win. My death, in his mind, would be too easy. He wants me to fight again. He wants to see me writhe in pain and anguish over my lost mate, and he'll do anything to keep me alive because it feeds his superior ego.

I can almost see him gloating over dangling Eve in front of me, as if I'm some lab rat used for experimentation.

Maybe I am. Maybe I don't care. Eve's torment hurts worse than a few broken ribs. Hurting her was the last thing I wanted. She's no freer from this prison than I am, but at least she's free of me.

"Back where you belong, you pathetic waste of space. If I were making the decisions around here instead of Aldo, I'd have dumped your sorry ass in the pile of corpses out back and left you there to rot for the buzzards next meal." The guard checks the corridors and tips the gurney.

I spill out, the filthy ground rushing up to meet me as I land on all fours. An audible snap of my ribs the doctors tried to set sends me yowling in blinding pain.

I roll across the concrete and notice more points of pain on my body, and then the door slams closed, leaving me to suffer alone. After taking all the hits to my head and belly, my body feels like it won't be long until fate comes calling. Karma at her best.

I clench my fists and beat the ground, but no amount of fury over my predicament brings me peace. No amount of howling calls my pack to heel. I never realized how much I relied on my selfless pack. Or how far I kept them at arm's reach for fear of being alone.

Maxon, my Second, never failed to offer words of truth. He stayed close, even during my darkest times.

Jaxson, as the enforcer of our MC and detective with the local law enforcement, merged pack life laws with public authority. He made himself available to me time and again. But did I take him for granted?

Thinking of Tavin who, without fail, was ready for a fight and who fought for justice even before he met his mate, sends

a wave of pride through me just knowing the shifter. He didn't abandon me. He was right there along with the rest.

Axzel, that young man I helped raise, who showed me that my efforts held value in his adult life as he matured into an Alpha of his own making, was still looking up to me as his mentor.

And Ben, he's not even a member of my pack, yet he's watched my back time and again.

But most of all, those who don't hold rank in my pack looked up to me. They may not have realized the importance they held at our weekly meetings, whether it was setting up, feeding me, standing guard, or cleaning up, but each and every one of my pack members lifted me on a pedestal and made my duties as their master easy.

They were my support system, and I let them down.

I failed to see that I can stand on my own two feet, which I still suck at because I'm too damn broken to stand. Yet, I realize I don't need to rely on anyone for help. I have the iron bars to hold me. The walls keep me steady as I flatten my hand on the masonry bricks. Even kneeling, I'm holding my own.

If I believe in my powers, however troubled my life is at the moment, I can look inside myself for the answers out of here. Out of this place. I thought I had my chance to place my mark on the world. I thought I failed. But I can change. I have to find a way to prove to those I care about that all their faith in me wasn't wasted.

Not only that, but I need to prove to myself that it's okay to focus on me, my safety, my health, both physically and mentally. Even imprisoned I'll find a way to hone my needs.

Somehow...

I take up a praying pose and place my forehead against the gritty floor. I pray like I had at the gravesite of my first mate

and unborn child, willing fate to give me a sign of hope. “I’ve let everyone who trusted me down because I was scared they’d leave me, and now they have. I’m to blame. I understand why no one has come for me after putting them in danger, after walking away. I’ll do whatever it takes to earn back their trust. To show them that I’m standing on my own two feet. That I can be the man they thought I was because I’m healed. Just, please, give me a chance. Give me a sign...”

It must be the grimy floor making me tear up. At least I tell myself that. But what I find is that a good brawl is needed to clear my head.

Nom, nom, nom...

Chewing, a beckoning gnawing sound resonates from the far corner of the cell, and the last meal they served was meager and hours ago.

I sit on my heels and twist my head, spotting my cellmate Chase rolled into the corner with his back to the world. But then he turns just enough to let me see what’s in his hand.

It’s brown and lumpy on the outside, not more than a handful, but the inside is the most perfect slice of stuffed bread I’ve ever seen in my life, and the scent of beef reaches my nose.

“This is from you, your sacrifice in the ring this morning.” He holds out a chunk. “Mule tossed it into my cell and every cell along his path to his own. I saved this for you. I don’t know who put the slices of meat inside, but I can already feel myself healing.”

The spongy morsel melts in my mouth, and the center portion is the most tender I’ve eaten in weeks. I don’t know how Eve managed it, but the fact she did is impressive as shit.

Somehow, she found a way, and I couldn’t be prouder. A full grin spreads across my bruised face. I realize there’s a

difference between abandonment and sacrifice. She hasn't forgotten me these past weeks or months. She's still walking beside me, finding ways to keep me alive. "It's from my mate. She's fighting for us, and I know your mate is as well. I'm getting out of here, and I'm not leaving until every single one of us is freed."

Chase pulls to a stand, surprising both of us. He weaves toward me and takes a seat beside me, lashing his arm across my shoulders. "I'm with you. How do you plan on pulling it off?"

"I haven't the foggiest idea." I chuckle and grab my ribs. In truth, my body feels like a battlefield of agony after that last brawl, but it's a familiar sensation. Broken ribs will do that to you, knock you down enough to give pause.

The pain in my side flares up as I reach for the wall to steady myself. With a slow, shuffling gait, I make my way to the water bucket in the corner, relieved it's clean and full. As I splash water on my face, I catch a glimpse of my reflection in the murky liquid. My once-proud features are now a gaunt, hollow mask of what they used to be. My eyes, which were once sharp and calculating, now look haunted and defeated. But I am alive. My head is clear with resolve to see the SA burn, and I'm leading the way, confident in my path.

The heavy clang of the cell door echoes down the corridor.

I crabwalk to the bars and press my face between them.

Familiar footfalls of Aldo, a hulking brute of a snake-shifter, strides into our cell block with all the authority of a king surveying his kingdom.

Fuck him and his immaculate uniform, a stark contrast to the filth and despair that surrounds him. I've seen men with less power and more compassion, but Aldo is cut from a different cloth, a tight smirk forming on his face as he revels in

the control he has over us. “Get ready for another fight, Acheron. You and your cellmate’s rest time is over.”

Chase scurries to the far wall, but not before dropping the nugget of bread he clung to.

Aldo’s snake eyes flash yellow. “Open this cell. Open it now!”

The guard accompanying him fumbles with the keys a full thirty seconds before the door props open and he gathers up the crumbs. “What the fuck is this? Who gave this to you?”

Aldo must know the answer because he pivots and struts toward the far end of the prison, still within view of me.

He stops along the way to shriek his disappointment at those still coddling their portions. “You think you can steal extra rations from me? You think you can lie to me, you worthless mutts? I should have you whipped for this.”

I keep my head down, feigning disinterest in their exchange. But inside, I’m smirking. This is exactly what I hoped for. My plan is unfolding. Mule, the man I lost to multiple times, is getting the word out and sharing his rewards. Even as he’s dragged out by the guards, he raises his thumb, as if giving us all a sign to stay strong.

I start to chant. “Mule. Mule. Mule. Mule!”

“Fuck all of you!” Aldo hisses, and the tips of his fangs break against his lower lip.

My chant continues to echo from the other cells, and our booming voices don’t let up until Aldo and his guards slam the main door leading to freedom behind us.

Soon others will follow in Mule’s footsteps. One strong man is no match for the SA, but together we are powerful. And I pledge to save Mule. To save them all.

The last bite of bread sits in my palm. Adrenaline courses through my body and a plan solidifies in my mind. I can just reach the open window and the rusted bars where they meet the concrete sill. Breaking the bars is a long shot. I can't fit through the space, even if I could bust out the bars, but I know someone who can.

I pass the remainder of my food to Chase to keep him strong. "Eat up. It'll take all the strength I have to whittle at the rusted bars and set you free."

CHAPTER 27



Eve

Nobody guilt trips me better than myself. Okay, maybe Laurel. She's my own personal hell, reminding me of all I've done in my life to feel guilty about. I want to scratch her eyes out when she glares my way. But then I realize, if Acheron is my scapegoat, I'm to blame for his pain. Me. So I allow Laurel to berate me all the way to my room, telling me that I'm an unfit mother, a waste of her time, and she's taking my babies away as soon as they are born.

She locks me inside and my vision slides into darkness as another panic attack forces me to take refuge in the corner of my lonely room. I can't seem to catch my breath, and the little stars circling my head prove I'm about to pass out from hyperventilating. "This isn't getting you anywhere. Suck it up and pull your damn self together, for the love of everything precious in this world."

Most importantly, my mate and our babies.

I want to beat the door and toss my furniture around the room. I would wolf-out if I could. But those would all be rash moves, and I've seen what thoughtless actions have earned me.

I shouldn't have put that meat into the bread. Now Aldo suspects it's me, and he's not wrong. I have to do better, be smarter, calculated, and restrained like Acheron.

Not only that, but I'm reminded that I'm an Alpha-of-Alphas' mate. I'll never forget who I am. I'll never forget what I've come to do. I just hope Acheron is as strong as I'm proving to be and can hold on a little longer while I plan a way to get us both out of here. I can't be rash about it, but I can't squander an opportunity either. It's a fine line I've never walked before. One that, if I don't think it out, could get us both killed.

Voices make their way into my room from the hallway. At least the alarm from the prison has silenced.

I wipe my tears. My feet tingle from sitting cross-legged for too long, but I stumble a path to the door to confirm and plaster my face to the slim pane, but they're out of sight. I press my ear to the door and listen. I don't need to see who they are to know it's one of the nurses and an orderly. Luckily, it's not Laurel.

"There's no one else. It's her or we all starve," the woman says.

By "her" they're talking about me. There must be an issue with the facility kitchen staff...

I inhale, holding it, and ground myself as I decide to chime in, however muffled through the glass, "I'll be good. I promise I'll do whatever you ask. The kitchen needs me. I didn't mean to barf on Laurel. My pregnancy hormones are unpredictable. I'll be ready with a bucket next time."

I don't dare admit that I doctored the bread. At this point I'm a suspect but there's no proof. It could be any of the female prisoners, and non of us are talking.

They come into view, both sneering, as if the next time I projectile on anyone I'm done.

Nurse Jill's features soften, but then I notice her swollen belly. Maybe she pities me. Maybe she's just waiting for me to

fail, so she can send me to that experimental area where I saw Eron. Or maybe she's like me, waiting for an opportunity to spring her mate.

Either way is okay by me, as long as I get out from behind this locked door. "I won't let you down."

The orderly removes keys from his pocket and unlocks my door. "Seems your little show in class has half the kitchen helpers in distress."

Well, duh. Most female shifters are all pregnant here. I'm not the only one feeding hundreds of prisoners three meals a day while queasy. Let me tell you, a pregnancy nausea spell is a sneaky bitch. I almost feel sorry for what I did to Laurel. Almost.

"Let me make it up to you. I'll work hard. I won't puke."

"Come on, there's no time to waste." The orderly widens the door and shoves me forward.

It's my lucky day. Or so I thought. Once inside the facility kitchen, it's me and two other bakers, both who have less experience than I do.

What a fucking shitshow. The first batch of dough doesn't rise and sets up like a slab of freshly poured concrete. No bueno there. Back to the proofing room. I expect to see a clean commercial mixer, but instead it takes me half an hour to wash out the dough glued to the sides.

I'm sweating and cursing, while trying to sort out my plan of how to escape with only one guard watching the service door.

At least in this kitchen I'm not micromanaged, except for that one orderly who keeps leering at me. How can I do this all by myself? I haven't even started the stew. "Uhm... Will there be more sous chefs coming to work the dinner shift?"

“No. Frankly, I don’t care if you vomit in this batch of bread. It all eats the same to the wolves. Finish this up. You have veggies to chop...”

I tap my cheek, leaving a floury imprint as I catch a glimpse of myself in the stainless-steel appliance while the orderly drones on about how much time it takes to chop carrots, onions, and celery. Why isn’t the other kitchen operable?

I almost pray my actions had something to do with disabling it.

But then his words sink in. I nearly question if I heard him right. This kitchen is feeding the wolves. Not all shifters, only that section of the prison—the wolf-shifter wing. Which means the small kitchen I thought served the wolf-shifters must be huge.

If so, I know exactly where Acheron is being kept from that first day I heard him calling to me. So even if they moved him from his original cell, he’d still be in the same ward. If I can free him, there’s a chance we’ll have our own army of wolves to hit the SA where it hurts. If there’s one thing I’m certain, wolf-shifters cower to no one.

I sever the dough into single serving rolls and place them onto backing sheets. The mission to reunite with my mate, locked away in this heavily guarded prison, hinges on this pivotal moment. The plan is simple yet crude—create chaos and seize the opportunity to escape.

As I inch closer to the oven with the sheet in my hand, a rush of anxiety courses through my veins. The guards are everywhere, and any mistake could blow my plan. But I can’t afford to let fear paralyze me now. This is for us.

With trembling hands, I adjust the oven knob, cranking the heat to its maximum broiling setting. My palms dampen with sweat as I watch the digital display climb, the temperature

rising rapidly, and the orange-and-blue flame flickering from the gas heating unit. I place the pan of mini loaves inside, intentionally leaving it unattended along with a roll of paper towels near the flame.

It doesn't take long for the paper to catch fire, sending flames dancing inside the oven. The acrid scent of burning dough fills the air, and the smoke detector wails in protest, echoing through the kitchen like a symphony of disarray.

I wave a cloth towel over the flames, as if doing so will dampen the fire that's now exploding out the open over to climb the walls. My face is hot and it's getting out of control here. Maybe I've screwed it all up and we're all going to burn. "Call the fire department. There's a fire in the kitchen!"

Panic grips me, but I tell myself to settle. The residue from the paper towel roll is all that's left now that the dough is on fire. This is a controlled event, even if the guards' frantic footsteps create a cacophony that reverberates off the cold, unforgiving stainless-steel countertops.

"You three, head to your wards. Do it now!" the orderly directs us, giving me a hard shove this time.

My diversion is working when I notice he's opened the door to the outside to ventilate the area while he sprays the fire-extinguisher foam on the rising flames. Guess no fire department crew is headed here.

Even through the dense, smokey air, I'm able to grab another towel and cover my mouth from the choking smoke. This is my one shot, because if Laurel finds out what I've done, she'll make sure I never see the light of day or my babies.

I grasp the opportunity to slip away from the kitchen, my heart battering my ribs with each step. But where I expect to be greeted by barbed-wire and cyclone fencing, I pop out into

the delivery truck area, but not outside of whatever has trapped me in my human form.

I dart my gaze around the trucks, the purr of their running engines my friend as I search for any signs of security cameras or patrolling guards.

I must remain unseen, but my bright-orange outfit might as well be the full wolf moon hanging in the sky. The narrow roadway stretches ahead, lit only by flickering fluorescent lights. The uncertainty of what lies beyond makes each footfall feel like a step into the abyss.

What are you waiting for? Beat a path out of this living hell!

Yeah, yeah. My wolf is one hundred percent on board with flying in lieu of fighting when she hears a pair of guards frantically discussing the situation.

I duck under one of the semi-trucks, making myself small as I press my back against the interior rubber tires. *Calm your breathing. Just a little longer. Acheron is counting on you.*

My breathing slows as I pray they pass me by.

The guards jog past, oblivious to my presence, their attention consumed by the chaos in the smoke-filled kitchen. My luck holds, and I silently exhale a sigh of relief.

In the distance, I hear wolves howl.

They're too far away to identify, but I feel it with every fiber of my being that my mate is closer now.

I continue to navigate the labyrinthine locks, avoiding guards and staying low to the shadows the truck beds create. The alarms still blare in the background, but the urgency of my mission propels me forward. I can't afford to lose focus.

As I approach the open roadway, I cling to the undercarriage of the truck. As soon as the guard completes his

rounds—

A rolling door on one of the trucks slams behind me. A second later, I hear footsteps approaching from behind.

Panic surges again. I glance around, searching for any means of escape. The open road is my only option.

The guards round the corner, and the taller of the two raises his radio to his mouth. “She’s close. I can smell her. Be bringing her in asap.”

My heart thuds in my chest. I’m not safe. It’s now or never. I burst from under the truck—

A hand reaches around my mouth and traps my scream. Then I’m dragged away.

CHAPTER 28



Acheron

It's a no brainer that sometimes you must play the idiot to trick the fool who thinks he's pulling the wool over your eyes. It's also a cliché, but here I've been a damned fool who's been fooling himself. For years I played the part of a brooding Alpha, carrying his and his packs' burdens on his shoulders. Grief and guilt were my cross to bear. Mine alone. Except that's where I was wrong. I wasn't alone then and I'm not now. Not here in this cell, though my companion is barely clinging to life, or in the world outside it.

I have Eve. I have my pack. The man lying in the corner of our cell hasn't given up and neither will I. If he can hold on to hope, so can I. If he can put his trust in me, I need to trust myself to get us out of here.

Otherwise, I'll end up just like him. Strong in spirit, weak in body. The stench of death clings to him, although it's less than it was an hour ago now that he's eaten. But when will sustenance make its way to this cell again? The smell of smoke has reached the prison, and that scent is laced with smoke from the kitchen. My nose is tuned to the scent of the hunt, and I smell roast and bread and all the fixings.

If we're not fed, it won't be long before Chase meets his maker, and no amount of hope can stop death once it's sunk its teeth deep into your flesh.

But locked in an SA cell isn't how I plan on going out.

Especially as the alarm rings out across the entire prisonscape. Something is happening, and I need to get both of us the hell out of here before the fire reaches this ward.

The bars are cold iron, fortified with magic that prevents shifting into my wolf, but he's there pacing beneath the surface, waiting for the opportunity to escape, lending me his strength. I've been working on the bars of the window for what feels like hours, pulling and prying until the concrete formed around them gives way.

The first bar breaks loose, and I rip it from the wall, but the gap is still too narrow for me or Chase to slip through. The next bar is loose and requires less effort. I'm close, so close to freeing myself and rescuing my mate.

"One more, Acheron. You can do this. You have to," Chase slurs.

I will myself to keep going, to keep fighting.

And that's when I see her through the bars, skirting the shadows created by the moonlight. Eve. But it's not possible. It can't be my mate. I'd sense her presence through our bond long before I'd see her. Besides, Aldo has her imprisoned on the other side of the compound. Whoever the woman out there is, it isn't my Eve.

Still, just thinking about her sitting in a cell like this, surrounded by filth and dying prisoners, is all the motivation I need to rip the rest of the bars from the window.

I'm halfway through the window, moving as fast as possible with several broken ribs, when I hear her voice for the first time in weeks.

"Get away from the window, Eron."

Eve's voice is music to my ears, like a well-tuned symphony in my head. My name on her lips is the most beautiful sound I've ever heard. She knows who I am, remembers me not only as Acheron but Eron. I can only hope that she remembers me as her mate and that whatever psychological torture the SA subjected her to isn't permanent.

But why does she want me away from the window? If she hasn't been brainwashed by the SA, wouldn't she be rushing toward the prison, encouraging me to climb out to freedom so we can escape together?

And just how did she escape the SA's clutches? They'd never let her go willingly. Not knowing how much she means to me. Doubt creeps into my mind, and I fear I've lost my mate again. A cruel twist of fate after tasting happiness and love once more.

I reach for her through our mating bond again, but she doesn't reply. At least not with words. But in the silence, I feel her heart beat in time with mine, feel the love she has for me.

And then it's gone.

"Eron, move back," Eve barks out an order, even as she closes the connection between us.

"Eve?" I ask, unable to obey her command until I know for certain that she isn't here on the SA's orders and under their control.

"We really don't have time for this." She levels me with a pointed stare and rests her hand on her hip. "A little help here, guys?"

Eve. It's her. *My mate, my Eve*. I'd recognize that stubborn look in her eyes anywhere. Damn, she's never been sexier than at this moment, bossing me around. My wolf agrees and plans to let her know just how much we both approve of this dominant side of her the first chance we get.

But that will have to wait until we bring down the SA.

Maxon and Ben step out of the shadows, revealing themselves just as I drop back into the room and crouch down by the opposite wall.

There's a loud boom followed by a blast of air and concrete dust. I rush to my cellmate, hovering over him to block the rest of the debris raining down on top of us. He's so close to death, even though he's eaten what I shared with him. But I'll do whatever is in my power to save him.

Eve and my wolves—our wolves, from the looks of it—rush into what's left of my prison cell. It takes all of my willpower not to pull her into my arms and mark her again right there in front of everyone.

“Maxon, Ben, do whatever you can to help this man. To help Chase.” I push myself up, checking my wrapped rib cage. I brush debris from the gauze, small chunks of concrete from my shoulders, and shake the dust from my hair before rushing to my mate.

“Eron.” She meets me halfway, opening her arms and wrapping them around me when I scoop her up. “I was so worried about you. I'm sorry I closed off the bond, but I didn't want to tip off the SA nurse. I needed to convince her that the therapy sessions worked and that I was cured.”

“You were very convincing, trust me.” I nuzzle into her neck, relishing in the warmth of her body against mine and the sweet smell of baked bread through the smoky scent. The longer I cling to her, the more I notice her sleeve is singed and the fibers curled. I have a feeling she had something to do with the alarm. But later, I'll ask her about how she escaped. Later... “I thought I lost you, that you wouldn't remember me.”

“Nothing and no one could ever make me forget you or the way I feel about you. My love for you isn't just in my heart or

mind, or the marrow of my bones. It's soul deep." Eve cups my face in her hands, tracing her thumb along my jawline, and presses her lips to mine.

I lean into her tender kiss, wanting more, needing more, but the pain in my side holds me back.

"You're hurt." Eve catches my wince and the hiss of breath I release when she runs her hand along the bandages covering my broken ribs. "How many are broken?"

"It's nothing. I'm fine," I grind out through clenched teeth as she continues to explore my side. "I'm fine. I promise. I'm just relieved to see you and that you're unharmed."

"Eron, how many ribs?"

She's relentless in evaluating my condition and no doubt trying to determine if one of our wolves is going to have to help me out of there. "Five, maybe six."

"You mean a quarter of one side?"

I do my best to hide my grimace, but Eve catches me yet again.

"We need to get you somewhere you can shift and heal." Eve tries to slip out of my grip and lead me away from the prison.

I reel her back. I'm not ready to let her go. Not yet. Not ever. "There's nowhere to go that's safe for me to shift. Besides, I'm not done holding you."

"Eron..."

I ignore the pain in my side and tighten my embrace on her. "It was wrong and stupid to leave the way I did. I'm sorry. I love you; you know that right?"

"I never doubted it. Not really." She stands on tiptoe and brushes a kiss against the tip of my nose, my cheeks, my eyelids, and forehead.

Each press of her lips against my skin is more reassuring than the last. But it's her words, the way she knows my soul and the rush of emotion I feel through our mating bond that undo me.

Eve is my mate, the love of my life, and the mother of my unborn child. And I'm going to fight like hell to keep her.

CHAPTER 29



Eve

Nothing worth having is ever easy. You have to work for it. And Acheron and I sure as hell have our work cut out for us if we are going to stay together. The SA isn't going to make it easy on us. They've made that abundantly clear, but they have no idea who they're dealing with. The SA thinks they know Eron, but they damn sure don't know me. Not the real me.

I've had my issues, but I'm a survivor. I'm fierce, a fighter, and the mate of the Timber Cove Alpha. It's about time the high-ranking members of the SA and I were formally introduced—along with a few of our wolves. Sure, I've met Aldo, but he's not the only board member or guard I want to punish.

Acheron may be out of his cell, but we're not free. Not yet. He needs to shift, to heal, and neither of those things are going to happen so long as we're trapped inside the SA's wards. "We need to move. Now."

Maxon picks up the shifter, Chase, who shared a cell with Acheron and hitches him up over his shoulder in a fireman's carry. "The guards had to have heard that. They're going to be here any second."

"They already are." Ben jerks his head in the direction of the group of guards charging toward us. "Run, Eve."

“Like hell.” Acheron steps out from under my arm that was still draped over his shoulder as I embraced him from the side. “I am done running. Eve is my mate. If the SA doesn’t like it, too fucking bad. I helped build this organization. I will raze it to the fucking ground if that’s what it takes.”

“I’m all for bringing down the establishment, but maybe we should wait until we’re on the other side of the wards and can shift into our wolves.” I grab Acheron’s arm, pulling him toward the outer fencing and the barbed wire surrounding it. I can’t believe that Maxon and Ben waited for months to make their move on the SA and aid in our escape.

When I felt Ben’s hand on my mouth, I almost died, but then I realized he was here, not only for me, but representing freedom from this oppressive administration for all who are imprisoned. Best of all, they didn’t come alone. Patience paid off for them—they hadn’t been caught like me. “Maxon, Ben, can you buy us enough time for me to get Acheron over the wards so he can shift?”

“What do you think?” Ben’s lips curve into a deadly smile as he claps Maxon on the shoulder.

“Oh, I think we can buy them some time.” Maxon chuckles.

His laugh sends a chill down my spine, and I almost feel sorry for the guards.

Almost.

Acheron and I aren’t wasting a second of the time the Alphas under his command provide. With my mate at my side, we run toward the fence and do our best to ignore the sounds of the fight breaking out behind us.

I know Acheron wants to stay behind and fight alongside his wolves. His emotions are pumping through our bond as fast as the blood rushing through my veins. After my little

therapy session and the way the SA had imprisoned Acheron—one of their own—I'm as eager for a fight as he is.

A fair fight, that is, and there is nothing fair about this fight. Not until he can shift. The guards' shifter forms aren't controlled by the wards like we are. With fangs, claws, and venom at their disposal, they are more than a match for our fists. Even with our enhanced strength and speed.

Maxon and Ben do their best to give us the time we need, but they can't hold the guards back for long. Acheron and I haul ass to the fencing, climbing over the stone wall and chain-link fence. The loops of barbed wire running along the top snag my clothes and tear into my flesh, but I push through the sting of galvanized metal scratching through my skin and drop down on the other side next to Acheron. It's the first time I've un pregnant with twins, and I cradle the weight of my belly. I'm not showing much through the loose clothes I changed into, but I'm still protective.

Eron digs his heel in the ground and carves a slash mark into the hard-packed earth, breaking the ward binding our wolves with one swipe of his boot.

The ward pops, a brilliant light exploding into the night air.

My wolf stalks to the surface and she's itching for a fight, but she knows that doing so could harm our babies. I'm calm enough to ask and smart enough to recognize Eron's skills as a leader. "There are other shifters being held prisoner inside the SA's compound. The women are protected, and safe in their barracks or rooms. I can leave them until we free the men."

Acheron closes his eyes and braces his broken ribs with his arm wrapped around his midsection. "I can help get them out. I'm familiar with the prison system and the split of shifter types. We'll need all the help we can get, starting with the wolves who are already on our side."

I can feel Acheron call to his wolf, and the animal stirs in response within him through our bond, but the time they spent trapped in that prison cell weren't kind to either of them. My mate isn't ready to shift. He needs more time to regain his strength.

"In your condition? What you need is a plan, Acheron. If you run in there before you heal your ribs and regain your strength, the SA and their guards could take you out. And I can't let that happen." I yip twice, calling out to Maxon and Ben, ordering them to take their Alpha back to the van to recuperate.

Maxon hops the fence in a single bound, followed by Ben, both landing beside me.

"He needs food and water. Once he shifts, meet me on the lower level of the prison. We'll work our way through the cells from the bottom up."

"Eve?" Acheron calls my name and sends a rush of emotions through our bond that stops me in my tracks. "Be careful."

I thought he was going to try and stop me, to plead with me to wait for him, but instead he put his faith and trust in me to save the other prisoners.

To save us all.

For a moment the knowledge that everything is riding on me takes my breath away, but I shift the weight of responsibility, balancing it on my shoulders, and ready myself for the battle to come.

I rush Acheron, wrap my arms around his neck, and steal one last kiss before rushing over the wall and back to the compound. I don't look back. I can't look back. Running in the opposite direction of my mate goes against all of my instincts.

But I have to.

Careful to avoid detection, I wait until the guards move their search from the compound's exterior wall. The head of security divides his team into three groups, instructing one to scour the facility top to bottom for any additional intruders, the second team to fall back and sweep the grounds, starting with a thorough perimeter check, and the third to follow him over the fence.

My heart is racing hard and fast, enough to give away my hiding spot to any shifter in the immediate area. I pull in a deep breath and purse my lips, exhaling soft and slow to calm my nerves and steady my pounding heart.

Ben and Maxon have earned Acheron's trust—and mine—long before we became a couple. They protect the members of the Timber Cove pack and don't just follow Acheron's orders—they watch his back. I know they'll keep him safe until he can shift and defend himself.

I'm on my own. At least for the time being.

There isn't time for a thorough search or to collect any incriminating evidence we can use against the SA if things don't go our way in a fight. It's a quick in and out for each room. If I don't see anyone alive, I move on to the next. I make my way through the so-called therapy rooms where their crackpot doctors try to brainwash shifters into submission and the cells where they keep aggressive Alphas objecting to the heavy-handed tactics of the SA. It's nothing I haven't seen before.

Except for the pile of dead bodies.

It looks like the SA has been busy covering their tracks while I was breaking Acheron out of his cell. The fact that they have something to cover up in the first place is disturbing. They're supposed to be the governing body for shifters. The embodiment of law and order. From what I can see here, that couldn't be further from the truth.

I reach into the back pocket of my jeans, pull out my phone, and start snapping pictures. If we want to convince the other packs about the corruption and abuse happening at the hand of the SA, we need more than just my word. We need proof. I'm still taking pictures, filling the gallery on my phone with the incriminating evidence we need to bring down the SA, when I realize I'm not the only living thing in the room.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

The head of security and his goons are standing in line formation, blocking the only exit from the room. I send a message to Acheron through our bond, but I'm afraid he won't reach me in time.

There's only one way out, and I'm going to have to fight like hell to get there.

CHAPTER 30



Acheron

Tenacity is my motor, and hope fuels me, but it takes every ounce of my remaining strength to watch Eve run back into the facility and not go with her. She's a strong, capable fighter and even stronger in spirit. I know she has what it takes to defend herself, our unborn child, and even me if it comes down to it.

That doesn't make letting her go off on her own any easier.

I should be with her, fighting alongside her. Not stuck in the back of some stupid van licking my wounds like an injured pup. I'm her mate and the Alpha of the Timber Cove wolves, for fuck's sake.

"Acheron." Maxon rests his hand on my shoulder.

He gives what I assume he thinks is a reassuring squeeze, but it's anything but. "Eve is a warrior, but she doesn't know Aldo. I should be with her. Not only that, but Aldo could capture her and use her as bait to trap all of us."

"I don't need a mating bond to know what you're think—"

"No? So you're some sort of mind reader now?" I feel the growl build in the back of my throat, and I don't bother to tamp it down. I need somewhere to aim my frustrations, and Maxon is standing in the line of fire.

As much as I should know better than to bark at one of my wolves when they aren't doing anything wrong, I can't help myself. I need to release the tension and fear of losing Eve again or risk going out of my ever-loving mind.

Maxon squares off with me. "You're not the only one who's had to fight for their mate or fight for the freedom of the pack."

My Second takes my temper in stride because he actually does know what I'm going through.

So does Ben. So does Tavin, even though he stayed behind to gather additional aid.

Hell, if there's one thing the Timber Cove wolves have in common, it's fighting for love. Fighting for what's right. Happily ever afters don't just happen on their own, no matter what the fairytales say. It takes blood, sweat, and sometimes a few tears. My wolves are living proof of that. Eve and I are too. Nothing and no one will stop our mating or from becoming a family.

Especially not the SA and fucking Aldo.

"Sitting here doing nothing is killing me. I need to be inside the prison with her." I try to stand and push open the back door of the van, but my legs buckle under my weight, giving away the severity of my condition.

The torture I endured at the hands of the SA men and women I served alongside for decades is taking a toll. They've hurt me more than I care to admit. Not that I have to. Maxon and Ben can smell bullshit a mile away. They've known me long enough to know when I'm heaving a steaming pile of it their way.

Not that brushing off my wounds matters. My body is giving me away regardless.

“Take it easy.” Ben braces me by my elbow and helps me ease back down onto the rubber mat of the cab. “You’re going to cause more damage if you push yourself. Especially since you can’t shift yet.”

“I’ll give it a few more minutes. After that, we’re going after her.” I’m not sure how much time has passed, but it feels like an eternity since Eve went back into the compound. Even in this weakened state, my wolf and I can’t sit on the sideline much longer.

It’s an unnecessary precaution because I trust my mate and her fighting skills, but I reach through the bond to satisfy my craving for Eve’s presence and concerns over her safety. Eve will no doubt tease me for worrying or scold me for exerting myself when I should be focusing on healing, but I know in my heart she would do the same.

And I’m glad I did.

Eve’s heart rate is accelerating along with her stress levels. I can feel the endorphin dump in her body through the mating bond. Something’s wrong. Very wrong. If something happens to her, I will never forgive myself.

“Eve’s in trouble.” I shrug off Ben’s hand, channel every ounce of strength in my body, and push myself up off the floor of the van to my feet. “She needs our help.”

“Acheron—” Maxon’s voice holds an edge of caution.

“Enough!” My roar echoes through the close quarters of the rear of the van. I’m done waiting. “I will not sit here a moment longer while she is in danger. Especially when I am the one who put her there.”

“I was just going to suggest letting us go first.” Maxon opens the rear doors and jumps out with Ben right behind him.

I don’t wait another second to leap out from the van and hit the ground running. Nothing will stop me from getting to

Eve. I don't care what it costs or how long I'm out of commission afterward. With my Alphas behind me, I work my way through the brush, and over the wire fencing. The barbs tear through my clothes and skin. If not for the warm trickles of blood trailing down my forearms, I wouldn't even know. It's not like I care. Nothing matters but reaching my mate.

To my relief and surprise, I don't have long to wait for our reunion.

Eve is okay.

She's alive. Running for her life, but alive. And there's a handful of shifters behind her.

I almost laugh at myself for misreading the adrenaline and racing heart I sensed through the bond. Eve's a warrior and can handle herself. Still, danger is danger. I won't ever stop worrying about her safety.

Especially with the high-ranking officials in the SA still unaccounted for.

"Acheron." Eve races toward me, her arms outstretched for an embrace. "What are you doing? You're supposed to be in the van."

"I've never been good at sitting around waiting." I pull her close, burying my nose in her hair and breathing her in. "Next time I'm coming with you. I don't care how hurt you think I am. I'm not staying behind."

"I'm not planning on there being a next time." Eve pulls back, sparing a moment to brush her lips against mine in an affectionate kiss before drawing our attention to the shifters she rescued from the SA prison. "You were right to worry. I did run into a little trouble in the lower levels, but I had some help."

The moment Mule steps in front of the others, I blow a breath of relief. "Thank you for helping my mate. The Timber

Cove wolves are in your debt.”

But as I check out each man, all of them show signs of dehydration, malnutrition, and abuse. They are so much worse off than I am—at least physically.

Metaphysically, I’m not so sure. Whatever the SA did to me and my wolf is taking longer to heal than I would have expected. He’s there, lurking just beneath the surface, but is still unable to take control of my body and his true form. As much as it pains me not to be able to shift, I know now that losing Eve would be even worse.

The shifters Eve released from SA custody nod their heads in a submissive stance before my mate in a show of respect and thanks before they steal one of the SA’s SUVs and barrel through the main gate.

“I think they have the right idea—heal, shift, regroup, return for their women, and slaughter our adversaries.” Eve grabs my hand and pulls me toward the fencing and the van waiting on the other side. “The officials are long gone. I don’t know where, but they hauled ass out of here. There are more shifters inside the building, but we’re going to need more allies if we want to get them out safely. And maybe an extra medic or two.”

Eve’s ready to treat the injured, and she’s smart enough to know she can’t do it all by herself. Good thing I have resources. “There’s a second facility. A safe house for the highest-ranking members of the SA in the event of an attack.”

“If it’s safe as you say, let’s get the hell out of here.” She hurries her pace, helping me over the block wall.

Once on the freedom side of the SA, I race alongside my mate, open the rear doors when we reach the van, and help her inside. “We’ll need to assemble two teams. One for recovery here and the other with us to take down the SA.”

Maxon climbs in the driver's seat and revs the engine, the tires kicking up dirt and clumps of grass before Ben or I have the chance to secure the doors. He slams the passenger door closed while Eve and I pull on the rear doors, slamming them shut.

We're alone in the back of the van, or as alone as we can be for the time being. The sense of relief I feel at having Eve back in my arms is palpable. She curls up in my lap with the ease of a feline shifter, despite being all wolf. My wolf.

"What big eyes you have." I pinch her chin between my forefinger and thumb and tip her head up until she's looking at me. "What beautiful lips you have."

"The better to kiss you with," she hums.

Eve's smile is all that is right with the world and mends the remaining pieces of a heart I never thought would be whole again.

She completes me in a way that only a true mate can. The kiss we share is proof of that. I feel her in my heart, my mind, my soul, and I will do whatever it takes to keep her and our unborn child safe.

CHAPTER 31



Eve

Feeling safe only lasts as long as the monster hunting you hasn't found your hidey-hole. We're back at one of the pack's safe houses, and Acheron still hasn't shifted. We've both showered, scrubbing off the filth after our imprisonment, but not all that tarnished us during our incarceration can be washed away. I twist in the sheets beside my mate, the cloth feeling scratchy against my skin. At least I blame my irritation on the covers. I can't be sure the SA hasn't tracked us down and will bust down the door at any moment.

But I force myself to calm down. It's not good for me, it's not good for my babies. Thankfully, the least of my worries is my growing belly, which says a lot. The SA made sure my babies were taken care of in all ways.

Eron rests his hand on my belly, his soft breathing letting me know he's asleep. It gives me time to check out all his bruises. He's healing, but it's slow going.

I'm more than a little worried Acheron won't be able to shift, that the SA has done irreversible damage to his wolf. I can feel the worry gnawing at my mate, the fear that he's somehow less of an Alpha because of it. Or that I will see him as less of an Alpha. Even in his dreams. It's a fear I understand more than I care to admit. I had my own doubts about whether I could be enough for a wolf like Acheron. But he's proven how much I mean to him.

And as much as I love the wolf, I am more in love with the man.

Acheron stirs in the bed beside me, his fingers splayed across my abdomen moving as he explores the curves of my body. He pulls me tight against him.

I'm enveloped in the feel and smell of his arousal, and my body flushes with need for him. "I missed you. So much..."

It's all I can get out before my thirst for him takes over. Careful not to brush against his tender ribs, I lean over him, using my arms to brace me as I lower. His kiss and hunger is a match to my own. When he touches me, sparks ignite, confirming whatever the SA did to both of us didn't break our bond.

Acheron presses his lips to my shoulder, setting my skin ablaze as he leaves a trail of kisses from across my collarbone, up my neck and the sensitive spot behind my ear, and I writhe with desire for him.

He breaks our connection, his lips hovering over mine. "I never expected to feel this way again or that I would be worthy of a love like this. My true mate."

"I'm happy to spend the rest of my life convincing you that you're worthy of being loved." I roll to my side, cup his face with my right hand, and claim his mouth with mine again.

A rumble of desire builds in the back of his throat as he deepens the kiss and slides his hand between my legs. Eron's masterful technique brings me to the precipice, slick with need and the overwhelming desire to feel him inside me. I expect no less of my body's reaction after being kept from my mate for so long.

"You like that, right there, baby," he growls in my ear.

"Eron, please." I barely recognize my own voice, husky from the passion building within me as I use his given name.

A name reserved for me and no one else.

He presses his fingertips into my hip as he pulls me on top of him, pushing the hard length of him inside as he settles my body to straddle him.

I roll my hips, moaning in pleasure as I bury him deep inside. He's as close to the edge as I am, but I'm not ready for this to end. I slow my pace, sliding inch by inch up and down in a sensual, yet tortuous rhythm.

"Eve." Acheron grips my hips, drives me down, pressing me against him until the pulse of his orgasm deep in my core brings me to my own climax.

I collapse against his chest, relishing the rise and fall of his labored breathing from our lovemaking and the racing beat of his heart.

"My little Alpha." Acheron trails a path with his fingers, moving them up and down my spine in a lazy dance. "My heart overflows with pride watching you take command, making decisions in the moment for the pack. Your strength and powers as a shifter come so naturally. I know with every fiber of my being that you were made for me, to be my mate."

His words draw together, exertion evident in his voice, and the movement of his hands massaging my back slows until they stop altogether as sleep claims him.

"I love you." I stay there for a moment, listening to the soothing, satiated beat of his heart before easing off him and slipping out of bed.

I long for the day when there aren't problems beating down our door, when Acheron and I can stay in bed without worry or care. But that day isn't today. My mate is still weak from the torture he endured at the hands of the SA. He needs my help to put an end to their regime once and for all.

Our future as a family depends on it, and nothing and no one is going to stand in the way of my life with Acheron and our babies—twins I haven't had time to share with him. Either that or I'm too scared of a future we haven't grasped. He deserves his second chance at a happily ever after as much as anyone. I don't want to put any more pressure on him.

But Acheron's belief in me spurs me on, adding to the strength and confidence that's been growing inside of me since the first moment I fell in love with him. He brings out the best in me and my wolf—or the worst, if you fuck with my mate.

But the SA is bigger than the US government. They have supporters nationwide who'll stand by them and fight, even when, I suspect, in their hearts and minds, they know what they're standing for is wrong.

Some just won't allow their egos and prior beliefs to be overturned, no matter what. It's not those we're calling in favors from. It's all those who are on the fence and will see the truth of the SA from the inside, like I did. With the proof I captured.

Now that I'm safe, I realize the SA is set to destroy the strongest of Alphas and to use their offspring for God knows what. Although, an Army of Alphas they control through brainwashing and fear tops my list.

A shiver threatens as I realize my hormones are raging. But this is life and death. No power will take my babies from us, and I'm confident that's been the plan all along. Double mating has been an excuse used by the SA because shifters are driven by their need to procreate. It's nature, and nature is never wrong. The SA used our weakness against us.

I know it sounds conspiratorial, but I need to imagine the worst so I'm ready. Even my wolf is on board with my thinking, and she's defiant at times.

It's time to call in the cavalry and put a plan into action.

After rooting through our combined pile of clothes on the floor at the foot of the bed, I find my phone. Seems the guys found my cell inside my saddlebag when they located the bike I rode in on. They even charged it using the van's charging station. I scroll through my contacts to Pepper's number and hit the call button.

"I was hoping I'd hear from you..." She answers on the second ring and is more than willing to help.

Not that I had any doubts about that, with Ben obviously communicating with his brother and the Craters of the Moon pack. But I know who I can rely on, and Pepper is at the top of the list. She has allies through the Silver Bend pack that used to be ours before it was divided. She has contacts, I'm sure of it. Her and her brother, Tavin. "Hey, girl. It's Eve. Sorry to call so early, but I really need your help."

Pepper's already up to speed. Ben reached out to his brother early in the morning, asking him to call his contacts, and now we're synced by our strategies. It seems great minds really do think alike. My bestie explains that our allies are on board and resources are on the way.

There's strength in numbers, and our numbers are rising with each favor we call in. Between the Timber Cove pack and our friends, the SA isn't going to know what hit them.

I'm still explaining to Pepper the layout of the facility, the female barracks and quarters, the prison where they keep the males, the perimeter fencing and guard stations for Pepper when Acheron pads barefoot across the carpet.

He comes up behind me and wraps his arms around my waist, nuzzling his face into the crook of my neck. He doesn't say anything, just listens as I wrap up my conversation with Pepper and end the call. I don't need my mate to vocalize his thoughts, his pride and approval in my decisions thrums through our bond.

“We make a great team. It means everything to me to know that I can trust you to watch my back and stand by my side.” Acheron kisses my neck and tightens his hold around my waist. “Now, I think it’s time I made a few calls of my own. I’ve been collecting I.O.U.s a lot longer than either Ben or Pepper.”

Acheron takes my phone, a wicked smirk forming when he punches in the first of many numbers, assembling our army.

CHAPTER 32



Acheron

The second time around, things make more sense. This isn't the first time I've assembled troops, but I'm really hoping it'll be the last. There's nothing I want more than to settle down with Eve, raise our baby, and live in peace with our pack in Timber Cove. Which is exactly why I find myself standing back outside the walls of a fortress I helped build, housing an organization I'd been an integral part of until falling in love with Eve.

I have no desire to step foot back inside those walls, not after what they did to me and my wolf. I'm still unable to shift completely. Only my hands and claws will change into my alternate form. Well, that and my jaw. It jets out halfway, two incisors pushing through the surface of my gums, ready to crack a skull or two.

It's better than human teeth. My bite will do damage, but not the kind I desire. Luckily, my strength is returning, little by little. But not fast enough. Not nearly fast enough for me to become the monster I need to be to do the things I need to do.

Which is why I am cashing in all my chips. All the favors I've collected, all the debts recorded in my ledgers will be paid in full tonight.

The facility looms in front of me. Four walls of concrete block and glass panes. Five floors of offices, labs, and

interrogation rooms. But it's the rooms below that cause the erratic change in my pulse, causing beads of sweat to form on my skin. It's the rooms below, the cells, the torture chambers that give me pause. In all the years I served the council, I never thought I would occupy one of those rooms or come face-to-face with the sadists the SA employs to do their dirty work. I never had a reason.

Until now.

I punch one hand into the other. I've known what goes on at the hands of the SA for years and chose to look away. For the greater good of all shifters. That's the lie I sold myself. That I peddled to my pack like a snake oil salesman. The damage my pain, my broken heart and grief has caused, not just the wolves under my command, but hundreds if not thousands of other shifters is a burden I will carry forever.

Like Atlas, shouldering the weight of the world.

I have no doubt my role in all this will haunt my dreams, but those nightmares are my penance, and I will pay it. I see the wrongs the SA and I are responsible for, and this is my chance to make it right.

For Eve. For our future. For our family.

"Where is everybody?" Maxon growls, clenching and unclenching his hands as he leans against the side of the van. "We're running out of time if we want to catch the security forces off guard."

"They'll be here, Maxon." Eve does her best to reassure everyone and settle their nerves before we head off into battle. "Tavin has called in Silver Bend debts. Ben got a text from Cam. The Crater Moon pack is on their way, and so are Acheron's contacts. And you know as well as I do that no one wants to welch where Acheron is concerned—they owe a debt and will pay it."

It seems I'm not the only one on edge. Perhaps they can sense my emotions through the pack bonds and are misinterpreting the emotional stew bubbling up inside of me. I tighten my hold on the connection to my wolves, closing them off from the turmoil within me to ease some of the tension.

Eve whips her head in my direction, fully aware that I've closed them off. That I've closed her off. Accusation simmers in her eyes. I know I'll pay for this decision later, so I give her a nudge through our bond, a little push of the love I have for her and our unborn child. Her steely gaze softens as she banks her anger at being cut off from me, but I have no doubt we'll still talk about it when this is over—and it's going to be a long talk.

Followed by a lot of apologizing and making up. Which is the best part and something to look forward to.

"I don't think we have to worry about when they'll get here anymore." Ben steps forward, moves closer to the compound's outer fencing, and pulls in a deep breath through his nose to process the different scents in the air.

I can smell it too.

The musk of wolf, of tiger, and the unique tang of serpent. I catch a whiff of gunpowder and oil, a telltale sign that humans are with the security forces as well. Their bullets won't kill us, I don't smell any silver. But they'll sure as hell slow us down. Which is no doubt the point. We're outmanned and outgunned. Things aren't looking good, but I have faith that our allies will make it in time.

Eve flanks me. "Together we can do anything. Even if we lost the element of surprise."

I extend my arm, offering my hand to Eve, and move to Ben's position with my mate at my side. "We need to take out as many as we can before the others arrive and we can advance. Focus on the gunners. I don't smell or sense any

silver, but if you so much as catch a whiff, signal me and regroup.”

“Three against...” Maxon pulls in a deep breath, counting the number of forces on the other side of the wall. “Fifty? Not a huge fan of those odds, but we’ve faced worse.”

My Second, and long-time friend cracks a smile and barks out a laugh. It holds a jaded edge but is contagious nonetheless and gives our spirits a much-needed boost.

“Right?” Eve joins in, lacing her fingers through mine and giving a little squeeze. “We’ve taken down bloodsuckers and demons. These poor bastards have no idea who they’re dealing with.”

“So, are we climbing that wall or—”

Ben’s question is answered for me with an outward blast of brick and mortar.

A cloud of smoke and dust envelopes us.

Debris rains down from the sky, while thunder roars in my ears from the explosion. The SA’s forces have blown a massive hole in their outer wall, catching us off guard. The security team floods out of the breach and marches over the rubble.

“Ready or not, here we come,” a guard calls out with a maniacal laugh as he tears off his uniform and shifts midair into a slithering mass of muscle.

I’ve fought snakes before and taught my pack how to take them down swiftly. The green anaconda is heading straight for who I assume he thinks is the weakest link in our trio.

And that is his first mistake.

Eve lets out a roar worthy of any Alpha in battle and descends her claws, slashing the snake beneath its lower jaw

as it moves in for a strike. Its mouth dangles from a flap of skin, blood pouring out as it collapses on the ground.

Our first victory, but it may very well be our last if our friends don't arrive soon.

More guards pour through the hole in the wall. Ben, Maxon, and I throw ourselves into the fray. They've already shifted into their wolves, and I've transformed as much as I can. Fangs would be nice, but at least I have my claws.

Maxon and Ben follow my orders, moving in unison to take out the guns, while Eve and I focus on the shifters around us. Blood soaks the ground, bodies pile up around us, but for each one we take out, five more come through the breach in the wall.

"Acheron!" Eve screams and leaps over my head, shifting only her head, arms, and hands into her wolf in an eruption of fur. She sinks her fangs into a panther's neck, dings her claws into its hide, and uses her body weight to roll the shifter to its back, exposing its soft underbelly.

Claws extended, I stalk over and slash the SA guard across its midsection, tearing through fur, skin, and muscle to the organs beneath. It's a waste of life, another shifter lost, but the guard made his choice. He picked a side.

And it was the wrong one.

Another small victory, but it's still not enough. We aren't gaining ground and we're barely holding back the onslaught of the SA's forces.

Maxon and Ben disappear in the sea of guards attacking them.

I'm not sure how much longer Eve and I can hold them back.

“I love you, Eve.” I reopen the bond between us and the pack and push all the love and pride I feel for my family, for my wolves through the connection. If we’re going to go down, we’re going to go down fighting, but I want them to know exactly how I feel.

I should have told them before, told them more often. Something I plan to rectify if we make it out of this alive.

The rumble of motors briefly drowns out the gunfire and sounds of battle.

It’s music to my ears. The Craters of the Moon pack pull in behind our van and park their custom choppers and bobbers in several rows. The kickstands are barely against the ground before they shift into their animal forms and join in the fight.

If that wasn’t enough, when I didn’t expect to see my comrades, Tavin and his mate Kayla are trailed by Axzel and Leshia, Jaxson and Alina, and Maxon’s mate Naomi. Pepper and Cam arrive a minute later, a cloud of dust trailing their Harley’s. My heart explodes with pride. I nod my appreciation to each one, confident our packs back home are taken care of. Then spot another pack heading our way.

To my surprise, Gunner and a dozen of his old military buddies fall in behind the pack’s allies. I didn’t expect to see him here, but I’m glad he’s willing to put my transgressions in the past and focus on our mutual enemy.

I still have a long way to go to mend those fences and prove myself to everyone back in Timber Cove, but I’m hoping my actions here will help make amends.

We’re gaining ground, taking down the SA’s shifter and human guards alike and have worked our way back inside the compound grounds, but it’s not enough. The security forces are still fighting and keeping us from entering the building.

There’s one last favor for me to call in.

I hoped to hold on to this one in case of an emergency later down the line, but this is looking like an emergency situation now.

I kneel and bury my claws into the blood-soaked earth. “Hades, I could use a little help here.”

The old god answers my call, erupting from deep within the earth in a shower of grass, dirt, and rock. “I thought you’d never ask.”

CHAPTER 33



Acheron

Hades is as eager as we are to get inside the SA facility, and the tide is finally turning in our direction. He takes out a line of guards, knocking them over like bowling pins with one sweep of his massive arm. I watch with awe and gratitude as the security team, shifters and humans alike, are taken out of the equation, allowing us to make our way across the compound. We're almost at the facility, preparing to breach the main doors. Aldo and the SA are going down.

But there's one thing nagging me about Hades. By my connection with Eve, she's questioning his arrival too, as if our minds are one thought.

She shifts her head, arms, and hands to her human form, the only portions of her body she's allowing to take their wolf form. "Hades knew where to find us, knew what we needed before you even asked for it."

Granted, Hades is a god. He's equipped with powers I can't even begin to understand, but from what I do know of his abilities, omnipresence isn't one of them.

The massive god scopes out the scene before landing his weighted gaze on mine, as if he's not only omnipresent but all-knowing.

I swallow because undoubtedly, he knows my involvement with the SA and might just take me out along with the rest. Still, with a sinking feeling brewing in my stomach that I'm not going to like the response he gives me, I press, "How did you know we were here?"

"I am god, wolf." Hades pounds his fist against his chest, and the thump of his curled fingers against muscle booms with the bass of a drum. "You ask for help in one breath and question my powers with the next."

"Yeah, I guess I am." A shadow shifts in my peripheral and pulls my attention from the god for a split second. Not much time, but more than enough to realize what other creatures are lurking inside the compound grounds.

Creatures that haven't been here before. Not until Hades' arrival.

"Acheron?" Eve laces my name with apprehension and confusion, questioning where I'm going with this line of questioning.

Not that I blame her. After all, I am the one who called the god here. Why on Earth would I be challenging him? I nod my head in the direction of the shadows and wait for her to see what I see. I don't have to wait long.

She curls her lips back in a snarl that mirrors my own. Eve's claws extend from her nail beds and incisors lengthen to the threatening fangs of her wolf. "Demons?"

But she's not the only one with fangs running loose on the SA property. Vampires are here too. I can smell the filthy creatures a mile away. And that's when Hades' betrayal hits home, the pieces of the puzzle snapping in place.

I see the god for the deceiver he is and what he is really up to, but I can hardly believe it. Or maybe I don't want to. Believing it means admitting that I missed it the first time

around. That Hades has been playing me for a fool, using me and my pack as pawns in a bigger game. “All of this is because of you?”

“Not all of it.” Hades stretches his arms akimbo, to encompass the whole of the grounds. “I think this bit in particular is all you. I played my part, I’ll grant you that, but the demons and vampires were a necessary evil. If not for them, I would never have been able to determine which packs were the strongest. Well, not never. I am a god. Nothing is impossible for me. But it would have taken longer to weed out the weak links without them, and to be blunt, I don’t have that kind of time to waste.”

“What could possibly be so important that you need to start a war between shifters, vampires, and demons?” My wolf stalks to the surface, so close yet so far away from taking control, but the snarl that rips from my mouth is all his. “Do you know how many wolves your pieces-of-shit demons and vampires have killed, injured? They came after my mate.”

“Would you have claimed her as such without the looming threat of my demons and vampires? I think not.”

Hades has me there, but I refuse to admit it, as much for not giving him the satisfaction as for Eve not hearing me say it aloud. She knows better than most how stubborn I can be.

While I am certain I would have given in to the mating call eventually, I would have wasted a hell of a lot more time than I did without the threats against her.

“Your silence is deafening, Alpha of Alphas.” Hades claps his hands and rubs them together. “Now that you’re seeing things my way, perhaps we can work together to eliminate a mutual enemy?”

I like to consider myself a wolf of above-average intelligence. But even I’m having a hard time keeping up with the god’s irrational thought process. “The SA?”

“Obviously. They are responsible for the incarceration, torture, and death of my people for centuries.” Hades rises to his full height, showing the mass of his true form.

It’s hard to imagine that he would have any trouble eliminating the SA on his own. When I say as much, he explains why he needs our help.

“Arrogant of you to assume that the wards surrounding these grounds were put in place just for shifters.”

The god’s deviant smile sends a chill down my spine.

“They were made for me. I needed someone without the blood of a deity coursing through their veins to break it. With the walls down, I will have my vengeance.”

“We’re looking for a little justice of our own.” Eve crosses in front of Hades’ path and squares up to the god. “So if you’re done talking about it, maybe we can go kick some SA ass?”

An IED detonates to our left, showering us with debris, alerting us to the potential minefield separating us from the entrance to the SA facility.

I have only seconds to pull Eve against me and cloak her from the fallout. “Are you okay?”

“Yes. Just shook.” She peeks out from under my arm, both of us spotting Ben and Cam putting their military expertise to use.

I don’t have time to wrap my head around the synergy of my allies and pack as the duo get to work searching the compound for more explosive devices.

“Kill them.” Aldo appears on the second-floor balcony, head of a snake, his tongue split and testing the wind. “Kill them all. No one survives. Do you fucking hear me? No one.”

On his command, more shifters charge through the facility's doors and join the fight.

Once again, we are outnumbered. But the SA doesn't have a god on their side.

I snap my jaws, flashing my fangs. I dig my nails into my palms, pissed as hell at Hades. There will be retribution for the wolves our community has lost because of his asinine plan.

Still, the enemy of my enemy is my friend—and, right now, we need all the friends we can get. I remind the god, “You want vengeance, I want justice.”

“Hades, do something!” Eve growls over another explosion before running toward Ben and Cam.

Maxon and I are right behind her, joining in the search for our friends.

“With pleasure.” Hades taps whatever magic fuels his powers and sends a shockwave strong enough to destroy the facade of the building, leaving a gaping hole where the cinder block wall had been. “This is where we part ways. I must find and free my people, however many of them have survived. Once I've freed them, I will help where I can.”

Hades disappears through the blast site into the SA facility, leaving us with the aftermath on the grounds. I lift my eyes to the spot where Aldo stood and catch his black tail slicing the dust-filled air as he slithers inside what remains of the building.

“We need to take out Aldo.” I grab Eve's hand and lead the charge into the building. “Cut the head of the snake and finish the SA once and for all.”

We rush in, swatting at the falling debris. I know this building by heart and target the right side of the first floor, reaching the elevators. It's a long shot, but the stairs collapsed

in the explosion. “Here. We can take a utility lift up to the second floor where I last saw Aldo.”

“Are you sure it’s working?”

“I’m not sure of anything, but the stairs aren’t usable. If we have to, we can use the elevator shaft to reach the second floor.”

As we step inside and the panel lights up, my heart stampedes, as eager as I am to take Aldo down. We’re so close, I can almost taste our independence. Independence for all shifters. My future with Eve and our unborn child is within my grasp.

The lift chugs upward and comes to a jolting halt. The door shutters open.

But like a handful of sand, the freedom I sought slips away faster than I can hold on to it.

CHAPTER 34



Eve

The bodies of dead enemies smell honied, but snake-shifter Aldo Tamil smells like ass, which means he hasn't died in the explosion. It's lucky for him, not so much for us. The open lift doors reveal a large chamber. There are no walls apart from those that make up the shaft for the elevator, and only the paper-strewn, shifter-littered floor remains. But I don't focus on those who can't hinder or help me.

Aldo stands with his back to what's left of the window, clapping his hands with delight as he watches us step out onto the floor. We walked right into a trap.

Before I can even think of a plan, Eron rushes forward, trying to get to Aldo, but I know he isn't going to reach him before the leader of the SA springs his trap.

The soft hum of the HVAC system triggers Aldo into motion. He reaches for something that I can only assume is a weapon in his back pocket.

"No!" I lunge forward, hoping to catch up to Acheron and knock him out of the way, but I make my move a second too late. I'm not fast enough, not with my babies growing inside me. Everything I do, I have to do with purpose. I can't risk their lives when I feel a flutter inside my uterus. It's as if they're trying to tell me not to take unnecessary risks, which I

haven't thus far. But I may be forced to do something unimaginable as I watch Aldo slip on a gas mask.

I realize just how big a mistake we made in underestimating his viciousness. He baited us as if we were starving rats, and we galloped right to him.

There's a hissing sound as noxious gas is pumped through the ventilation system. Black spots dance along the periphery of my field of vision. Acheron blurs before his form disappears from sight altogether. The room goes dark from the thick gray gas. I can't see past the tip of my nose. I can't make out the muffled shouts from my mate. I try to fight against the *whaw, whaw, whaw* sound rising between my ears, and I think it's my fading pulse as blackness consumes me.

The last thing I remember before waking up on a dirty floor is the sound of my body smacking against the ceramic tiles on the second story of the SA building.

I moan and grab my head as I roll on my side to ease my roiling stomach. Then I remember my babies. What did the gas do to them? Are they still alive inside me? I clutch my belly, but I feel only the firmness below the skin. I flutter my lids, forcing my eyes to focus on what or who is in front of me, but even my lids protest with strain. "Ugh, what the hell? Eron?"

"I'm here, Eve." Acheron uses his elbows to drag himself closer to me and rest his hand on my forearm. "The nausea will pass. You're okay. We're okay."

"For now." Aldo rocks on his heels with his hands fisted in his pockets. "How sweet. She knows your real name. I suppose she knows all your secrets then, *Eron?*"

"I know everything I need to know about my mate," I snap back before Acheron has a chance to respond to this asshole.

Aldo is entirely too happy with himself, and it's now my life's mission to knock that smug-ass smile right off his noseless face. For good.

“Then you must know that all this second-chance mating business is his doing? And of course, he's shared his true feelings about love and the nature of our kind with you? A little fireside romantic chat, no doubt?” Aldo removes one hand from his pants pockets, snaps his fingers, and barks out orders for the overhead lights to come on.

A series of cages line the room. I recognize every single wolf trapped within them. Ben, Cam, Pepper, Maxon, Naomi, Jaxson, Leshia, Tavin, Kayla, Axzel, Leshia, and Pepper. Even Gunner. There are wolves I recognize, whose names I don't know, from the Craters of the Moon pack as well. All of them are in their animal forms. The steel bars of the undersized crates press against their fur. There's no room for them to stand, let alone turn around.

My throat is raw and raspy from the gas I breathed, feeling like glass shards are stuck to walls. It's excruciating to talk, but the pain doesn't stop me from letting Aldo know exactly what I think of him. “You sick son of a bitch. Let them go.”

“Aldo, what happened to you? You were never this cruel.” My mate tries a more rational approach, appealing to whatever compassion his former friend may have left, but it's no use.

“*Eron*, the future of these wolves is entirely up to you.” Aldo pulls his other hand from his pocket and holds up a smooth luminescent stone. “A witch made this for me.”

He rubs the stone and whispers something in a language I don't understand. Our friends shift back to their human forms, exposing all the injuries they sustained fighting. But even weakened, they hold one another upright to prove they won't buckle, no matter how many times Aldo uses his magic to force them into back-to-back shifting.

Bile shoots up to the back of my throat, but I swallow it down. I will not show my weakness to this man. But as I meet the desperate gazes of my friends, I'm not sure what Aldo's plans are, but they can't be good.

"I can control their shifts. Yours too." Aldo laughs and tosses the stone only to snatch it mid-flight. "Isn't it marvelous?"

"What do you want, Aldo?" Acheron grinds out behind clenched teeth. The muscles in his jaw twitch, a sign he's on the edge of losing control.

"Isn't it obvious?" Aldo's shoulders rise and fall on a dramatic sigh. "I had hoped you'd be able to keep up, but I suppose it's too complicated for your simple, lovestruck mind. So, let me spell it out for you. The two of you fight each other. To the death, of course. And then I let your wolves go."

"And that proves what?" Acheron lets go of my arm and pushes himself to his feet. "What a psychopath you really are? I should have put you down years ago."

"Eron." Aldo tisk, tisks. One corner of his mouth curls up in a horrific smile. "You don't mind if I call you Eron, right? When you kill your mate, your wolves will see the truth. Your truth. Shifters aren't human. That's what you said, isn't it? That we're more animal than man. That we'll kill each other for power, position, and to survive. We are nothing more than our basic animalistic needs. Your words, not mine. I think it's time you backed them up."

"You're insane." Acheron launches himself at his former friend and fellow councilman, but is struck down by a guard, two feet from his target. "I just lost my wife, my child when I said those things. I was in a dark place, depressed, grieving, heartbroken."

My eyes sting from the emotion Eron weaves through his explanation. It pains me to hear Acheron admit to those words.

Not because he believed them at the time, but because of how much he must have suffered to reach that point. How alone and isolated he must have felt, trapped in his own shattered world after the death of Tasha and their baby.

I fight back the gut-wrenching sob working its way up my throat and hold back the tears over my mate's emotional scars. Acheron told me he was broken after their deaths, but I didn't fully understand just how bad things had gotten for him. He always put on a brave face for the pack. His pain is my pain, but crying about it now won't solve anything. We need to fight. Together. Because there is no way one of us is killing the other to satisfy this sick fuck's fantasies.

"Eron." I say my mate's given name, calling his attention back to me in the hopes of using our bond to formulate a plan.

Aldo has other plans.

He uses the imbued stone to rip Acheron's wolf from his body.

Where my mate once stood is now the most beautiful and massive black wolf I've ever seen. I love seeing Acheron in this form. He is a power within his own right. Muscle, fur, fang, and claw. My mate is a true Alpha of Alphas.

But I'm not sure how much of him remains inside the wolf's body while he's under Aldo's control.

I strip out of my clothes, splay my hand across the swell of my belly, and tiny kicks meet my palm. A small sigh of relief slips from between my lips. But I'm not out of this nightmare yet.

I send out a prayer to the universe and any gods or goddesses that are listening that my babies will survive what Aldo is forcing upon me, and shift.

The change comes fast and hard, but I welcome the twisting of my bones, ligaments, and muscles. Fighting the

change, trying to slow it down could do more damage to the babies than just letting it come full force. It's a risk I'm not willing to take. Besides, I don't have much time. I need to communicate with Acheron, to reach out to him through our bond and formulate a plan.

The leader of the SA may have caught us off guard and have the upper hand, but we've taken down demons, for fuck's sake. We can definitely take down one shifter. With or without his magic rock.

Except, when I reach out for Acheron, he's not there.

CHAPTER 35



Acheron

Silence. It's deafening. I didn't realize how comfortable I'd become with the sound of Eve's voice—her deepest thoughts and desires—inside my head. Now that it's gone, I am teetering on the edge of despair—a get-wrenching feeling I thought I buried long ago. But it's back. Just as fresh, just as raw, and so much worse. Because Eve is my one true mate. The loss of her presence is second only to the loss of my first child.

The sight of her wolf in front of me is the one thing that keeps me from tumbling over the cliff and into the abyss of insanity. I reach for her again through our mating bond. Nothing. I try the pack bond and get the same result. Whatever hold Aldo has over my wolf is preventing me from connecting with Eve. Without a way to communicate, we can't form a plan.

All I can do is hope she picks up on my physical cues and follows my lead.

I stalk around my mate, circling her like prey. My movements are natural, fluid. After all, I am the apex predator. And yet, this goes against my very nature. Every instinct that I have as an Alpha and mated wolf is screaming for me to stop, to protect my mate, but I force myself through the motions until Eve follows suit.

We are locked in a dance in the center of the room. The howls of our wolves, both pack and ally forces, create the symphony for a deadly waltz with their howls. Under Aldo's spell, it's hard to tell the difference between despair and encouragement in the chorus of their voices. I block out the noise, the distractions, and focus on my mate.

I narrow my gaze, searching Eve's eyes for any sign that she understands what I want to do. What we need to do. *There*. A spark of recognition. It's all the confirmation I need.

Lips curled back in a menacing snarl, I lunge toward her.

"Yes, that's it," Aldo hisses. "Kill her. Kill your mate."

Aldo's laughter stings my ears and fuels the rage within me.

"She's nothing." His forked tongue darts out between his thin lips. "A weak, insignificant woman unworthy of being an Alpha's mate. You would be doing our kind a service by eliminating her from the gene pool. Weed out the weak."

Eve snarls and snaps her jaws. Saliva glistens as it drips from her fangs. In a blink, she's on me, her teeth sinking into fur but not drawing blood. She pins me to the ground and goes for my throat, leaving herself open to a countermove.

I use her weight against her, rolling us to the side, and flip positions, putting her beneath me, ever careful of my unborn. We're putting on a play, each of us acting out our roles in the performance with enough enthusiasm to fool our audience.

Eve uses her hind legs to throw me off, and the dance begins again. We take our positions opposite each other and circle the room until an opportunity to strike presents itself.

My wolf is out for blood. Aldo's blood. The leader of the SA is watching with rapt attention, analyzing our every move, and encouraging both of us to make the kill. He doesn't have

any real skin in the game and doesn't care who wins. But the joke's on Aldo.

The only wolf that will die today is him.

Eve pivots and tears off in the direction of the leader of the SA. I'm right behind Eve, both of us ready to rip into Aldo's flesh when I see a vision from my past sprout up in my path.

Tasha.

I shake my head. It's not possible. It can't be. I buried her all those years ago, along with the child she's holding in her arms. My heart and mind know this is an impossibility, a trick of the mind, more magic that Aldo has somehow gotten his hands on, and yet, it still gives me pause. Just a second.

But a second is all it takes to fuck up our plans.

Eve must have seen the image of Tasha too, no doubt recognizing her from the painting I kept hanging over my mantle. The one now stored in my attic. Whatever Aldo planned worked. Eve misses her mark and loses her chance to take Aldo out.

I toss the memories of a past I put behind me the moment I realized I was head over heels in love with Eve. I know now that this doesn't diminish the feelings I had for Tasha, our time together, or the love I will always carry for the child we were unable to bring into this world. They both hold a special place in my heart, now and forever.

But Eve is my mate, the one I am destined to be with. She is my family, my future.

And I will do anything and everything to keep her.

Aldo lashes out at Eve, striking her with the back of his hand across her muzzle.

Blood splatters on the floor. She picks herself up, dusts off the blow, and moves in for another attack.

I take advantage of the distraction she creates and attack from the right, moving in for the kill. Aldo is so focused on Eve gnashing her fangs on his calf that he doesn't see me coming.

I snap my jaws, and find purchase in his throat, sink through skin, deep in the muscle, and into his windpipe. I clamp my jaws, and I thrash my head left to right, tearing out his throat. I ride Aldo's blood-soaked, lifeless body to the floor as he collapses beneath me.

Without their leader, the remaining SA guards scatter. Let them run. There is no quarter for monsters like them. We'll hunt them to the ends of the Earth if we have to.

But there's no rest for the wicked, and there is still work to be done here.

The imbued stone falls from Aldo's loosened grasp and clatters to the floor, breaking its hold on our wolves. Eve and I waste no time shifting back and set about freeing our wolves from the cages lining the room.

The celebration and reunion is short-lived, however.

Demons and vampires slink out of the shadows into the room.

My wolves and I are battle weary but fall into formation and ready ourselves for another fight.

"Calm yourselves, wolves." Hades shimmers into existence with the beautiful Aradia at his side, and his joy is palpable. "I like to make an entrance, and my people have been freed."

Eve clasps her hands together and lets out a weighted sigh, a dreamy gaze in her eyes. "The two of you found each other."

It seems we aren't the only ones who reach the happily-ever-after of their journey and are ready to start living it. I nod

my appreciation to Hades.

“You are free, Alpha. Free of the SA and the curse that has plagued your wolves for centuries. I release my hold over your she-wolves. The only bond is the true mating bond.” Hades wraps his arm around Aradia and leads her back toward the shadows and their world within them, pausing only briefly to add, “This is my gift to you, Acheron, for keeping your oath to help me find Aradia. You may call on me in the future should you ever need aid.”

The old god and his mate disappear into the darkness.

Wetness leaks from my eyes, the relief of an overwhelming sense that all is right in the world hitting me hard. I pull my mate to me, embracing her and reuniting with Eve in a tender kiss—a kiss that binds us once again. “I would be a liar if I said I wasn’t glad to see Hades go. Still, having a god among your allies, owing you a favor, may come in handy someday.”

“I just hope you never have to call it in. Our babies are ready to go home.”

I blink, wrapping my mind around her words. “Twins?”

“Healthy babies, who are strong and enduring like their father.”

She places my hand on her belly, the tiniest of kicks reaching my palm. “Brave like their mother. Steadfast.”

With our pack behind us, we lead the way out of the rubble. The SA is finished. My wolves, and all shifters, are free from their persecution and Hades’ curse. It’s finally time for us to return to Timber Cove.

To start our life together. To be a family.

EPILOGUE



A year later... 4th of July

Eve

“Careful, it’s hot.” I pass a family-sized pepperoni pizza with extra olives to Eron, who’s playing delivery guy to the multitudes in celebration of Independence Day. Ever since we freed our wolves and numerous others from the coils of the SA, our pack has doubled in size to the point that we’ve added another two-thousand square feet to our theater/pizza room. But all the joy that the house renovations—including the fixed floor in the living room—bring me can’t compare to the warmth that simmers in my heart. I’m so in love with Eron and our babies. So proud of the man, husband, and father he’s become. I want to shout it to the heavens.

Eron strolls up to the order window and slides his elbows across the counter, looking as sexy as ever in his tank top that shows off his muscular arms. “How much longer before the All Meat is ready. Tavin says he’s ready to eat a demon.”

I chuckle, but my laughter isn’t only from the playfulness of my pack and their willingness to come together, not only to celebrate our freedom but our love for one another.

I never thought I’d see Eron in his element, no longer a broody breast walled up in his castle, but extroverted to the

point that feeding his people has become a nightly thing. “Tavin will have to wait another fifteen minutes because demons aren’t on the menu.”

In fact, I haven’t seen a demon or a vamp since I left the SA, and I hope to never see either again in my lifetime.

Two beepers ping, one for the oven and the other reminding me that it’s time for the babies to wake up for their dinner. “Pepper, can you stand in for us?”

“You got it, mamma.” She gives me a one-armed hug.

She’s devoted to calling me mamma after the birth of the twins. And she’s not wrong. I love the name my babies will call me, love being a mom to our daughter and our son and watching them transition from newborns to babbling six-month olds.

Eron is beside me, always listening to the monitor to the point that he’s obsessed with his children. But again, he’s excited that he’s finally a dad who gets to raise his pups to be Alphas of their own someday. “Ready?”

He winks. “For anything you want to toss my way, babe.”

I can’t help rolling my eyes. This man is dedicated to me in every way, and I mean that with the best intentions. He’s devoted wholeheartedly, making sure that I have help when I need it and alone time too.

Eron gathers up my hand, leads me upstairs to the first floor, down a hall, and up another set of stairs where he pauses midway at the wall with the paintings. “I’ve been thinking...”

My belly flutters with anticipation. “About painting again? I think you should. You’re a very talented man.”

“Maybe someday, but this isn’t about the art, it’s about the woman there. I painted these long before I took my first mate. I kept dreaming of this woman on the bluff at the edge of our

property, looking out to the sea. I never saw her face, but her body was slender and her hair long and flowing.”

I don’t know what to make of his story, but curiosity pulls me in. “Go on.”

He spins me to face him and wraps an arm around my back, fusing our bodies. “The woman in the painting wasn’t my first mate. I knew that, but Tasha loved that I painted them. She insisted that I decorate this wall. Maybe she had a sixth sense about her destiny...”

My eyes prick with tears. I could see the happiness in Aradia when I saw her with Hades. I didn’t believe in reincarnation. I’m still unsure if I fully buy it. But fate has a strange way of making love work in the best of ways. Eron and I are living proof.

“That day I saw you on the bluffs—so long ago now—everything snapped into place. It was you. It’s always been you. I’m as sure as my love for you. Of course, I didn’t know I’d have to fight harder than ever to get here. But I’d do it all again if I had to overcome my depression and to earn your love and respect.”

“And you have it, one hundred percent.”

He brushes his lips against mine. “Every time I questioned my future, this lady in the painting told me to keep dreaming, keep fighting for a happy future. Now I’m holding the real thing.”

“Forever and ever. I’m so proud of you and love you so much.”

Little cries echo from above.

“How about we take a raincheck until the party’s over, and I can show you how much I love every inch of your body and soul.”

I smile and press my lips to his. “It’s a date.”

We rush upstairs to the nursery. It’s just how I imagined, the light filtering through the dormer shears, the floor padded in colorful squares and perfect for our little ones.

I pick up Abigail and bury my nose in her neck. She smells of baby soap and her fine, dark hair is a mixture of mine and Eron’s. She looks like me, where our happy little boy resembles Eron.

“Wolf, you will carry the next generation. You and your sister. The Suda Alphas.”

Pride fills me as we head downstairs to share our babies with the Timber Cove Wolves, the Craters of the Moon pack, and the ever-growing Silver Bend pack.

It seems like forever ago that we were both alone. But no more. I pause on the landing leading to the party when I notice Abigail staring out into the crowd, her eyes wide and a smile on her face when she points at a shimmering spot past the fray.

I nudge Eron. “There against the redwoods. That isn’t Hades, is it?”

Eron laughs, his booming voice one that is contagious. “Family is who you surround yourself with. Whether that be your children, your mate, your entire pack, and people fighting for freedom. And sometimes a god, a giver of wealth.”

Warmth fills me from head to toe. I have everything I dreamed of and more. A life where soulmates will never be separated. And a god who lifted the curse from all she-wolves and replaced it with abundance, family, with the happiest of ever afters, and with love.

The End

* * * * *

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Dear Reader, thank you for spending time with the Timber Cove Wolves MC! It means so much to me, and I love reading reviews! Please consider leaving a review of Acheron's Wolf Moon [here](#).

If this is your first book in this series and you want to read from the beginning, start with *Maxon's New Moon* by visiting Cyndi's website at www.cyndifaria.com/timber-cove-wolves-mc.

If you've read the series, I'm certain you'll fall in love with my other series, and see reappearing characters sprinkled throughout! XO Cyndi

Series by Cyndi Faria can be found on her website at www.cyndifaria.com. Best reading order:

1. Faeted Vampire Series - An enemies-to-lovers, Fae-Vampire fantasy romance.
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Want to read Hades and Aradia's full story? *Hades*, book 6 in the Blood Chronicles series by author Jennifer Fields, can be found on at most distributors.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR, CYNDI FARIA

Two-time *USA Today* Bestselling Author Cyndi Faria writes hot, heart-warming paranormal romance about fated mates, werewolves, vampires, shifters, fae, and magic! She also writes sexy contemporary romance. Her stories are well known for their twist-turns you'll never see coming and happily ever after endings you crave.

“Cyndi Faria. 5 STARS!!! Oh my goodness!!! (S)eriously one of the best romances I have read!! No joke. That very first page pulled me into their world. Cyndi painted me a world so amazing that I did not want to leave at all. The action in the book kept me on the edge of my seat and there was never a dull moment. Every page is filled with captivating words that will draw you right in. And talk about twists!! I must have said OH MY GOD more than a couple of times.”

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