



SHIFTER QUEEN

3

ANCHOR OF THE BEASTS

LOLA GLASS



Anchor of the Beasts

By Lola Glass



Copyright © 2021 Lola Glass

authorlolaglass.com

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the author except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Names, characters, and places are products of the author's imagination.



To everyone who told me to get a real job.



1

I walked to the bathroom. My mind spun and my body shook as I stripped out of the ash-coated clothes, dropping them on the floor before I stepped inside the shower.

Cold water ran over my heated skin, cooling me off before it went warm.

My mind ran over everything that had happened.

The desedra ended.

The Tidals killed me.

I died.

Tuslan's magic brought me back.

Tendira went savage.

...Beasts, going over it again somehow made it sound even worse.

A thought struck me—what if I could restore Tuslan and everyone else's humanity the way I helped the infant shifters

shift?

“Tuslan!” I yelled.

His gigantic fluffy white head poked into the shower.

I walked over to him, putting a hand on his head. “Stay still for a second.”

He didn’t move as I shut my eyes, slipping my magic into his consciousness and searching for the place all of his forms met. I found it, but it no longer looked or felt like it should.

He still had all five forms, but the human form was completely detached from the others. The others, instead of being connected with my magic, were all just smashed together.

Shit.

I tried sweeping my magic through, connecting his human form to the others.

Nothing happened.

I tried a few more times, and I knew I was doing it right, but still, nothing happened. My magic just didn’t stick.

Which probably had something to do with the whole “the Pillar must fall” thing the Tidals had been spouting. But how was I supposed to lift my fallen-pillar self? I was alive; what more was there to it?

The Human and Shifter Queens had been a part of Tendira for thousands of years; there were no legends about how we were created, or what there was before us. At least, none that I knew.

“Thanks, Red.” I patted Tuslan on the head before withdrawing my hand and stepping back under the falling water.

“Think, Mesa,” I whispered to myself, grabbing my shampoo and lathering it in my hands. “All the shifters turned savage. You’re the only human, but...” I trailed off.

I was the only human, but not the only non-shifter. “The immortal ex-Queens.”

Maybe I wasn’t alone.

I finished scrubbing myself clean of ash before slipping out. Tuslan was lying against the bathroom door, guarding it. He watched me dry off, but with none of his typical intense flamey desire. The human-minded Tuslan was definitely not home at the moment.

But who was he, without his human emotions and desires?

Guess I was going to find out.

I threw my hair up in a bun, ignoring the way water slid down my neck and back from the soaking wet pile. With the towel wrapped around me, I went to the door and tried to open it.

Tuslan didn’t budge.

“Hey, Red. Can you move?”

He looked at me with disinterest.

Shit.

I gestured to the door. "I need to get out there."

He set his head down on his paws, apparently determined to take a nap.

"I have to figure out a way to save the damn continent," I growled. "You've got to move."

His eyes closed.

What did wolves like?

I looked around for meat or something, but of course, the room was bare. It was a damned bathroom.

I tried to just tug the door open. It opened a sliver, but met a solid mass of wolf. He didn't even seem to notice the collision.

What did Tuslan like?

He still had his lalidro, so maybe... me?

I walked back to the tub, sitting on the edge. "Tuslan?"

He peeked one eye open, and I fought a triumphant grin.

I had him.

I let out a dramatic sigh. “Today was really hard. Can you come snuggle me?”

The other eye opened too, but he didn’t budge.

It occurred to me that without his human mind, he probably didn’t understand my actual words.

I needed to use body language, then.

My shoulders hunched over as I made myself small, covering my eyes with my hands.

There was a drawn-out moment of silence before I heard paws on the tile.

Tuslan’s nose met my neck.

I scratched his head, then jumped up and rushed at the door. I got it open, grabbed a hanger with clothes on it from the closet, and then ran out of my rooms and into the hall before he could trap me anywhere else.

He snarled at me when he caught me, less than a second after I stopped.

“I’m sorry.” I made an apologetic face. “I know you want to protect me. Thank you for that. But I can’t stay in that room forever if I want your human back, and I definitely want him back.”

He snarled again, nudging me toward my rooms with his nose.

“Sorry, Red.” I patted his nose. “I’m not going back in there.”

I tossed the towel to the floor and waited to see if my public nudity pissed him off, even though there was no one around.

He didn’t even flinch though.

Hmm. Maybe his possessiveness of my body was all human.

I dressed quickly, my mind churning through the possible ways I could find the ex-Queens. Most were from Lava, but one was Rain and a few were Fringe. I’d seen three or four of them at different points during the desedra; those were probably the only ones I could realistically find.

And what would I do after I found them?

That, I didn’t know.

But hey, one thing at a time.

The section of the castle that currently held Lava was closer than the one that held Rain, but I knew I’d rather deal with Rain shifters than Lava ones at first, so I headed that way.

I knew all the shortcuts, and I took them. The castle was eerily quiet; Tuslan had killed many of the wolves inside, and I imagined the rest had gone outside. What wolf wanted to remain inside a set of walls when there was open land beyond them?

I wove through hallways, and up, then down, stairs. When I reached the Rain portion of the castle, I slipped down the hall. Tuslan kept growling at me, but I just stepped around him when he tried to block me from continuing. He let me walk around him, which seemed like a good sign.

“Move!” A woman’s voice yelled. “Beasts, Yorn, I don’t want to die locked in this room just because you won’t move your heavy ass!”

My lips lifted in a ghost of a grin.

At least I wasn’t the only sucker dealing with a possessive male.

“Hello?” I called out to her. “It’s Mesa. Are you okay?”

“Thank the beasts. Mesa, my mate’s blocking the door. He shifted, and I can’t get him to shift back. It’s like he doesn’t understand me at all.”

“Tuslan did that too.” I paused. “I sort of died about an hour ago. Tuslan had won the desedra, so he somehow managed to bring me back to life with his fire, but I think they’re all savage.”

“Shit.”

Yup.

I advised, “Try moving away from the door and acting sad. That distracted Tuslan enough for me to make a run for it.”

“Okay.”

I heard footsteps, followed by sniffing.

Heavier footsteps followed, and I grinned.

At least I wasn't failing at *everything*.

The door flung open, and the immortal woman slipped out. Her hair and skin were dark, and her eyes were a soft, steady toffee color. Unlike the shifters', hers didn't move any more than mine.

Tuslan snarled at her, throwing himself between us.

Another wolf snarled and came charging out.

Crap.

No, not crap—shit.

We had no way to communicate with our very possessive, very protective wolves.

Wolves, from different packs, who would see no reason not to kill each other.

I saw the moment she realized it, too.

“No!” She threw her arms around her mate's neck as I shoved my body between Tuslan and the immortal.

Our efforts were meaningless.

Their bodies collided, jaws snapping and claws slashing, and we crashed into each other before hitting the tile.

“They won’t stop until one is dead, and it won’t be your mate who dies,” she said, her eyes desperate as she lifted herself up on her forearms. “I’ll make a run for it. Save Tendira, and stay away from the other immortals.”

She rose to her feet, and then took off running down the hall.

Her mate snarled and took off after her. Tuslan started to follow, so I grabbed a fistful of his bloody fur. “Stay with me,” I pleaded.

He didn’t understand the words, but my expression must’ve been enough.

He snapped his teeth in the direction the others had gone, and then plopped down on the tile next to me. His tongue stroked over the aching elbow I was holding.

Curiosity had my eyes narrowing, looking at him closer. He continued licking my elbow... but if he was so concerned with the injury, why didn’t he just heal it?

I wondered if he didn’t realize or understand his other forms somehow.

Memories niggled at me, and I recalled the wolves outside. Only wolves.

In a crowd of wolves, shifting to any other form would be an advantage. So if no one had shifted, they must not have realized they could.

I'd seen Tuslan's forms though; the only form he didn't have access to was his human one.

"I have no idea how to fix you," I murmured to Tuslan, burying my fingers in his blood-soaked fur. I'd never expected to be okay with touching bloodied fur, but after everything, the blood didn't seem like a big deal. He needed a shower, but I doubted I'd talk the wolf into one.

I needed food... and a big magical resource book would be good too. I didn't think we had anything like that in the castle, and I knew the building better than anyone, but I'd check. What other option was there?

Tuslan and I headed down the hall, toward the kitchen, as I made a mental list of all the possible locations for an ancient history book or magical guide.



2

We stopped by the castle's library, Tuslan still licking my achy elbow. I found a book bag hanging from the wall, where I expected it, and tossed it over my shoulder.

I'd already read every single book the small library boasted already. The history ones had been assigned throughout the years, and the fictional ones had been my escape.

However the first Queen of Tendira had anchored the shifters to herself... that was the information I needed to find. And I was certain none of our castle's books had that information.

Even though the books didn't have those answers, some of them referenced other libraries in Tendira. And one of those libraries was probably my best bet.

Tuslan growled at me when I tried to leave the library, poking the overflowing book bag with his nose. It was really damn heavy, but I hadn't thought the wolf would notice—and obviously, I could carry my own book bag.

“You want to carry this?” I asked him.

He blinked at me, poking the bag again.

He didn't understand what I was saying, but I eased the strap off my shoulder. "This is a book bag." I shook it toward him, not knowing if he could learn human words at all but willing to try. "Book bag."

He shoved his head through the strap, and I was glad it had been waterproofed. Bloodying ancient history books would've been a shame.

We headed to the kitchen, and made it without any problem. I could hear howls every now and then from somewhere outside the castle, but no other fighting noises, luckily.

After sitting down at a table in the back corner of the kitchen, I took the bag back from Tuslan and scrubbed my hands in the sink before opening it. The first two books came out—the ones I thought would be most-likely to have information I wanted.

I opened them carefully, setting them on the table before heading to the main part of the kitchen. There were leftovers from the feast the day before, and things already prepared for the one that was supposed to happen tomorrow.

I grabbed a few different plates and brought them to the table with me. Eating while reading history books was probably a terrible idea, but given that I was hungry and Tendira wouldn't have a future if I didn't figure out how to fix the wolves, I decided just to be careful and not worry about it.

My eyes skimmed passages as I ate. Partway through my meal, I heard a soft rumble and glanced over at Tuslan. He was watching me, like always.

"Did your stomach just growl?" I wondered. He had to be hungry; he'd been fighting all day, and then he'd gone savage

and killed a bunch of Tidals, and probably used an assload of power to literally resurrect me from the dead.

He didn't answer; of course he didn't.

I dropped my food, slipping out of my chair and heading to the fridge.

I opened the doors, and my eyes landed on a disturbingly large chunk of raw meat. Cold, raw meat.

Gross.

But maybe not gross to a wolf.

It took some serious muscle, but I wrestled the platter of meat out of the fridge and down to the ground.

"Here." I gestured to the meat.

Tuslan stared at it with a look I could only call disdain.

"You're hungry, and we both know you're not going to leave me alone in here so you can go hunt. Eat the meat." I collapsed back into the chair, exhaustion weighing me down.

I'd died, and my magic had been drained, and I just wanted to sleep. But I didn't know how long it would be until I could really do that; I couldn't just collapse in bed and sleep while all of Tendira was savage and fighting.

I nibbled on food while my eyes skimmed the books, eyelids growing heavier by the minute. Tuslan didn't go any closer to

the chunk of meat, but that was his call. If the beast wanted to starve, I couldn't exactly stop him.

My head jerked upward as I ripped myself out of an accidental sleep. I shook my head, and out of the corner of my eye, noticed Tuslan chewing.

I also noticed an entire loaf of bread that had been sitting on the table, that I hadn't yet touched, was gone.

Had he wolfed down an entire loaf of bread?

I closed my eyes again, letting my body hunch as if I was falling asleep.

There was a flash of white fur, and a whole plate of chicken pies disappeared.

I opened my eyes, grinning at the wolf, who was back in his typical position as if he hadn't done a damn thing. "Sly bastard."

He blinked at me.

"I tried to feed you. You should've told me you wanted real food." I grabbed the other plates off the table and set them both down in front of Tuslan.

He eyed me, like he expected me to take the food back or something.

I headed back to the rest of the leftovers, setting the plates down on the floor and uncovering the food one by one. There was way more than I could ever eat by myself, and I knew it had

to take a shitload of food to satisfy Tuslan because I'd never seen him full.

I was pretty sure he didn't eat as much as he could to maintain full strength most of the time; he just didn't need to. But he had slipped out to hunt a few times while we'd been at the castle, and he'd started eating human food too. So, him not needing to eat had changed since the desedra started.

"Eat," I told him, when I found that he still hadn't touched the food. Instead, he was watching me suspiciously.

I sat on the floor next to him and grabbed a chunk of meat. "Eat." I held it up toward his face.

He waited a moment, and then finally ate it out of my hand.

"Eat," I repeated, gesturing to the plate.

He understood what I meant, finally, and inhaled the food.

I got up and grabbed myself a glass of water, then filled up a bowl and put it on the floor.

He stared at it with as much disinterest as he'd given the raw meat.

"Needy wolf," I grumbled, filling the glass again and carrying it over to Tuslan. His wolfy mouth opened, and I carefully poured the water inside.

He stared at me expectantly when it was gone.

We repeated the process four more times before he was satisfied, and then I shuffled back over to the books.

A muffled howl from somewhere outside surprised me, making me shiver.

A yawn stretched my face, and I stood. “I’m too tired to keep searching aimlessly. Let’s see if there’s a library marked on Cina’s map,” I said as I put the books back in their bag. Tuslan made me hang it over his neck again, and then the wolf followed me out of the room.

My steps were heavier now that I’d eaten. My body wasn’t just tired—it was exhausted. Theoretically, my magic would drain much slower after Tuslan and I went through with the Amra, but I didn’t know when that would happen. It wasn’t like the savage wolf could verbally speak the oath that would bind us together permanently, making our lalidros golden and our magic one.

Even if he did have access to his shifter form, I was pretty sure I’d need to figure out a way to tether the shifters back to my magic before I could become immortal. Immortality sealed the Shifter Queen’s power, from what I understood.

Tuslan’s side brushed mine as we walked.

We found the throne room without any problems, and instead of heading over to the couches or thrones, I walked up to the map that had been painted over the entire wall that the throne faced.

My eyes scanned the map I’d stared at on so many occasions. Capitol cities were marked, as well as one or two others in most pack territories. My shoulders drooped when I didn’t find any

mention of a library. I'd known there wasn't one on the map, but I'd hoped for the best.

“Now what?” I asked Tuslan, though he couldn't respond.

I missed my Alpha. He'd won the desedra and our magic had connected, but we hadn't gotten to celebrate or anything. There hadn't even been a victory hug or kiss.

A yawn stretched my mouth, and I lowered myself to a seated position on the floor. My gaze slipped over the map again, this time just trying to take it in. My attention lingered on the Blood Pack territory, and my eyes were drawn to a jagged area of their border.

My mind went back to the cave—to Tuslan's hoard.

It had to be somewhere along that jagged-looking edge.

Hope rushed through me. “You have a library,” I told Tuslan. “How the hell did I forget about your hoard? You've got more history books than all of Royal combined. Maybe you have something about the Queens.”

He lowered his head to his paws and shut his eyes. He had to be just as tired as I was.

I ruffled his fur. “I know, big guy. I'm tired too. But we need to get to your hoard. Which means I need to figure out a way to get you to shift into one of your winged forms.”

I walked up to the map wall. The moment my hand left Tuslan's back, his eyes were open and he was watching me again. I dragged a couch over to give myself a few more inches,

then climbed up the furniture and pointed to the jagged edge on the map. “We need to get here,” I told him.

He still didn’t understand, of course.

Maybe if I got him to his dragon or phoenix form though, he would naturally take me there. When he had lost his mind to his beasts for a bit after Wren tried to kill me, that was the place he’d carried me.

But how would I get him to shift?

Crisis was what propelled shifters into shifting to new beasts; maybe I just needed to put myself in some kind of a crisis that would require a dragon or phoenix to fix. The only kind of crisis that required a set of wings, though, was the falling kind.

Shit.

Another yawn stretched my face. I stepped back down to the couch’s seat, then dropped to a normal seated position on the cushions and sagged against the furniture.

To get Tuslan to shift, I was going to have to jump off something tall. I’d need him to lose his shit and fly after me, so it couldn’t be a wimpy little jump, either.

I’d need my magic ready to catch me in case Tuslan didn’t, though. I couldn’t actually risk my life—not now that he had no access to his fire to heal me or save me again.

But to get my magic ready, I’d need to sleep. Sleeping while there were wolves fighting and packs warring seemed like a shitty idea, but what else was there? I had to find some kind of

record about the previous Queens, and there was nothing in the castle.

If I had to sleep to get there, I had to sleep.

With a guilty sigh, I stood up again. “Let’s go back to my room,” I told my wolf. We started walking, and memories of sharing my bed with Tuslan, being held by the beastly man I loved, had me correcting myself. “*Our* room.”

Beasts, I ached to feel his arms around me.

“It’s probably a good thing you’re trapped in that form,” I told the wolf, trying to be cheerful. “Because if you were human right now, you’d probably chain my body to yours or do something else equally ridiculous since you probably felt me die and should be losing your mind with overprotectiveness right now.”

I would’ve happily taken the chains over the fur, though.



3

When we got back to the room, I left the door wide open in an attempt to keep Tuslan from trapping me inside again. He snorted at me, but didn't shut the door.

I gestured for him to follow me into the bathroom, and then turned the shower on. "I have to wash your fur," I warned him. "You're all bloody."

He didn't respond, of course.

"I'm going to lose my damn mind if you don't learn to talk back soon," I muttered, wrapping an arm loosely around his neck. With a tug, I began trying to drag him across the bathroom, toward the shower.

He plopped down on his stomach when he realized what I wanted.

"Tuslan," I groaned, trying to drag his bulky ass across the tile. He didn't budge. "You don't get to sleep in my bed if you're covered in blood."

The threat didn't work. I didn't really expect it to, but it was worth a try.

With a final huff, I ditched him and stripped. Heading to the shower, I gestured for him to follow me.

He ignored me.

“Nothing I can do,” I mumbled to myself, stepping back under the water. My hair was still wet from my last shower, but my hands and other bits of my body were bloodstained thanks to the stubborn bastard outside.

The completeness of my exhaustion began to set in, and with it, came the memories.

I sagged against the wall as flashes of things I’d lived through assaulted me.

The complete blackness of death.

Laying on the ground, claws digging into me.

Wren’s attack, and the way I’d stopped her heart.

Sitting outside in the cold, chained to a tree.

Jaspe throwing me into a wall, and then dragging me across Blood land.

Watching Cina’s head leave her body.

A small noise escaped me. I didn’t want it to be a cry, but I think maybe it was. Everything was overwhelming—infinately overwhelming.

I'd been new to violence before the Tidals invaded my castle. The months following Cina's death, I'd not only been on the receiving end of cruelty and pain, but I had become a murderer.

Wren's eyes flashed through my mind, and tears welled up in them. She was a traitor, but I had still loved her.

A big white head appeared in the open doorway of the shower, off to my side a bit. Tuslan watched me warily.

"I'm fine," I told the wolf. He'd probably smelled the salt of my tears in the air though; he had a damn good sense of smell.

But he still didn't understand my words.

A tear rolled down my cheek.

Beasts, I was so alone.

Tuslan stepped into the shower. I moved back to give his big, furry body some space, but he snuggled up against me and dropped his gigantic head on my shoulder.

My arms wrapped around him, and I held him to me fiercely.

I wasn't alone.

Not entirely, at least.

Even without his human mind, Tuslan had stayed with me. He was mine, and I was his. Our magic was connected through

the lalidros, and while we wore the same marking, we would never truly be alone.

“Thanks,” I whispered to my wolf.

He licked the back of my neck.

I was sure there was blood dripping down my entire body at that point, thanks to the mixture of water, and bloody fur, and skin, but I didn't care anymore.

We stayed like that for a while, and then I grabbed my shampoo. I'd wash him with it first, since he was the one coating me in blood.

He sniffed it suspiciously when I squeezed it into my hand, giving it the stink-eye.

“It's just soap,” I told him, flashing him a smile as I stuck my fingers in it and showed him how it bubbled as I rubbed it over my arm.

He sniffed my arm, and the suspicion in his eyes vanished. His tongue licked up the soapy suds on my skin, and I laughed when he spat it out.

“You like the way it changes my scent, huh?” I teased him, lifting my handful of shampoo up to the top of his big head. He'd probably be pissed before I finished scrubbing his fur, but he'd survive.

He licked my face. Probably to clear out the taste of the soap, I imagined. He liked the way my skin tasted when he was in his

human form, so I imagined he felt the same about it in wolf form.

“Now you’re going to smell like me,” I told him, mostly to fill the silence. I didn’t usually mind silence, but with my mind dragging me back to memories of the shitty things I’d survived, I didn’t trust myself in the quiet. “Usually, I smell like you. You make sure of that. I never asked if you care about smelling like me, but I should’ve. When you’re back in human form, I will.”

I continued scrubbing him, rambling about the way things smelled, and then about infants I’d helped shift, and then about my favorite foods. Anything to keep my mind off the dark stuff I didn’t want to talk about.

The shampoo was gone by the time we were both completely blood-free, but I was proud. Tuslan had a whole damn lot of fur, so getting that shit clean was an impressive feat.

When I turned the water off and went to grab a towel, Tuslan shook his fur out violently. I sputtered a laugh as he soaked me further. Luckily he didn’t smell like a wet animal, thanks to the copious amount of soap I’d used.

I laughed again as I grabbed two towels. Wrapping myself in one, I threw the other one over my wolf’s back and head. “You’re a goof,” I teased, holding my towel in place with my upper arms while I scrubbed his face-fur with his towel. Having water dripping into your eyes and mouth from your hair couldn’t be fun.

He licked my wrists while I dried his face, and then licked my face when I set the towel back down on his neck and back.

He followed me out of the bathroom, waiting patiently while I squeezed some water from my hair and threw the strands up in

a bun again. I'd get dripped on, for sure, but needed to get it out of my way so I could think a little more clearly.

In the closet, my eyes caught on my crown. It was beautiful, but heavy, so I hadn't bothered wearing it since the day I introduced myself to the desedra's competitors.

Beasts, at least that was over.

Now that my energy was connected to Tuslan's, I didn't have to imagine a future where I was mated to some monster. Now, I had the thoughts of an eternity with the Blood Alpha to keep me motivated.

The idea of spending forever in Tuslan's arms encouraged me to figure out the Soul of Tendira stuff so I could get my man back.

I left my crown where it was and reached for a set of my old, comfortable golden clothes from the closet. My eyes caught on a flash of black, and I turned.

Tucked at the back of the closet, the black clothing Reta had given me during my first week in Blood Territory hung freshly cleaned.

My fingers skimmed the fabric.

I wasn't Royal Pack anymore; there *was* no Royal Pack anymore.

And the black clothing would make me feel closer to Tuslan.

I pulled the clothes off the hanger and slipped them on.

After I was dressed, I grabbed the large backpack I'd traveled from Blood to Royal with. I folded some clothing, setting it at the bottom of the pack, and then grabbed my coat, swim clothes, and the sandals Tuslan had given me months earlier and added them in just in case.

I didn't really know what was going to happen next, after all.

Deciding I'd pack the rest when I woke up, I set the backpack on the floor and stepped out of the closet. Tuslan was waiting just in front of it, sprawled out on the ground once again, and I nearly tripped over him.

He licked my foot as I stepped over him. A soft smile curved my lips, and I scratched his head.

"We can't sleep too long," I warned my wolf. Padding over to the bed, I slipped under the blankets and gestured the wolf over. He seemed to understand the gesture, making his way to me and jumping up on the bed. It supported his weight, but only because he'd replaced my old bed with a stronger one when he moved things around.

He was always thinking ahead.

"After we get a little rest, I'll have some magic back and we'll test out my theory," I told him, thinking my plan through.

I couldn't jump off anything *too* big, because I really wouldn't have much magic, but all I needed to do was scare him into shifting.

He snuggled up to me, and I draped half of my body over his big, soft body.

“Goodnight, heater,” I whispered.

Though he didn’t whisper back a, “Goodnight, Pillow,” I knew he would’ve if he’d been able to. And that alone made my lips curve upward in a small smile.

Tuslan wasn’t truly there, but he would be. And when he was, he would be mine. For good.



4

When I woke up, I knew I'd slept longer than I'd intended. Guilt flooded me at first, because the wolves were fighting and I was the only one who could stop them. But then I remembered why I'd slept, and the guilt faded.

I'd needed magic to test my theory about getting Tuslan to shift, and now I had it. Not a lot of it, but enough.

The wolf was still snoring beside me, making me smile and hug him tighter. He was there, and he was mine, and the rest of the shit would be dealt with soon enough. What really mattered was the marking on my abdomen, and his too.

He woke up when I squeezed him, and he turned his giant head to lick my nose. I laughed, and he licked it again.

"Good morning," I told him, slipping out of bed. "We're going to get you into your dragon form today, and then you're going to take me to your cave."

I knew he couldn't understand the words, but I said them anyway. If I didn't talk to him like he was himself, I would probably lose my mind.

He tilted his head, like he was trying to understand.

My lips lifted in a grin. “You’re going to hate the plan,” I promised, patting him on the head as I passed him, headed to the bathroom.

After I washed my hands, I turned the water off and listened. I couldn’t hear any more howling outside the castle, which I hoped was a good sign.

I grabbed my backpack when I passed the closet, then slipped it over my shoulders. I needed to pack it full of food and water, because Tuslan’s lair didn’t have a kitchen or anything. If he’d been his usual self, he could’ve caught us food and cooked it too, but while he was in wolf form, I wouldn’t hold my breath for the perfectly-cooked treemouse his human had provided me with.

We passed a window on our way to the kitchen, and I peered outside. Stress swelled in my abdomen when I didn’t see a single wolf. There had been a whole mass of them fighting the last time I looked, so where had they all gone?

I didn’t see any bodies, though, so at least that was good.

“What’s going to happen to them without any humanity?” I wondered to myself. Though I assumed they’d behave like wild wolves, they were far from the small beasts the human lands held. A shifter wolf was fiercer, and meaner, and much, much bigger. Most didn’t cling to mates and family groups the way the humans’ wolves did, either, though they did gather in packs.

Deciding to take a better look around from above while Tuslan flew us to his hoard, I continued toward the kitchen.

Going through the cupboards, I searched for dried foods. Those would last the longest, I knew.

When I found a cupboard full of dried fruits, vegetables, and meat, I dumped it all in my backpack. There was still room after that, so I found some wrapped bread and cheese as well as some ripening fruits and vegetables and tossed those in too.

With my backpack filled to the brim, I wrestled it onto my shoulders and grabbed some more leftover food to eat for breakfast.

There was a whole bag of cooked bacon in the fridge. I suspected it had been left by the chef who checked Tuslan out and was so surprised by what she saw that she dropped a whole tray of the stuff.

That had happened long enough ago to make me question the food's safety, so I held the bag out toward Tuslan to sniff it. He would smell if it was going bad.

He sniffed, then dipped his nose in the bag and swallowed the bacon.

All of the bacon.

I gaped at the wolf... and then burst out laughing. He eyed me with confusion, and I scratched his head, my laugh fading to a grin. "I just wasn't expecting that."

We finished off the leftovers from the feast—well, *Tuslan* finished off the leftovers—and then he followed me to the west tower; I wasn't ever going back to the east one.

He growled when we started up the curling staircase, and his growls got louder and angrier the further up we went.

“This isn’t the tower I was attacked in,” I told him, not sure why he was angry. “You should be able to smell that.”

His growls continued growing louder and angrier until he stopped me before the door that opened into the tower’s room itself.

My gaze swept the door. Thick wood, covered in burns and claw-slashes and actual claw-sized holes.

“Is this where the desedra led you?” I asked him.

His snarl wasn’t an answer, but I was pretty sure it meant yes.

“I’m sorry, Red. The castle doesn’t have a balcony or anything else for me to jump off, and I need you in dragon or phoenix form,” I apologized, scratching his head. “I’ll make it up to you with a belly rub or something.”

He continued growling, his chest vibrating unhappily.

With the room bringing back bad memories or bad vibes or something, I knew he wouldn’t let me stay long before he started herding me down the stairs.

Which meant I didn’t have time to hesitate.

Trying to remain calm and casual, I walked to the window and made a show of peering outside. It was pretty tall, so it would be a struggle to get myself up high enough to throw myself through it, even though it was plenty wide.

I dragged the window open, inhaling fresh air. I didn't smell smoke or blood or anything else unpleasant enough to remind me of the massacre that had happened in my castle. Or the thousands and thousands of wolves roaming Tendira without a shred of humanity left.

“No wolves out there either,” I remarked.

Tuslan paced the room, snarling to himself. Poor wolf was a bit traumatized, and I felt shitty for bringing him back there.

I felt shittier about what I was going to do to him, though.

“Sorry, Red. I can't think of another way,” I whispered, then threw a barrier up beneath me to boost me to the window. My feet kicked off the ledge, and then, I was freefalling.

I heard a roar before a glittering red dragon swooped down below me. I collided with his back hard enough to let out a cry of pain, which earned me another roar, but then we were flying.

“Take me to your hoard!” I yelled at the dragon as my arms wrapped around his thick neck. I shoved my hand up toward his nose, wanting him to see the jewels on it. “To your gold! To your treasure!”

I felt somewhat confident that was where he'd take me anyway, but hoped the jewelry would nudge him that way too.

Even if I felt like a pirate, yelling about gold and treasure.

My eyes scanned the land below us, and I saw massive groups of wolves moving. I wondered if they were returning to

their territories; what other reason would they have for travelling away from the fight they'd been in?

We flew for a while before I noticed the familiar scenery. The jagged cliffs, the sharp rocks, the calm waves... I scanned the cliffs, hoping I'd catch sight of Tuslan's hideout.

When we got there, I wasn't sure how we would get in since he was in dragon form. He'd jumped out and shifted mid-air when it was time to leave the last time, because the cave's patio was small and its rocky covering didn't have any gaps wide enough for a massive dragon.

I wasn't sure his wolf form would fit through either.

I didn't see the porch until Tuslan was diving toward it. We spiraled through the air and my stomach knotted even as a grin split my lips.

Tuslan shifted a fraction of a second before we collided with the rock, and I held on with everything I had.

We made it smoothly through the opening, and Tuslan rolled us enough that his furry back collided with the wall so I didn't have to. The collision still knocked the breath out of me, and I wheezed as I stayed there on the cold rocks, snuggled up against the wolf like we hadn't nearly lost a fight with a cliff.

The idea was so funny that I couldn't help it; I snorted. Tuslan let out a chuff that made me laugh. "We almost died," I crowed, laughter bubbling up louder. "Damn, that was fun."

He chuffed again, then nuzzled my neck with his nose.

I scratched his head for a bit, staying on the ground and staring out at the ocean in front of me. I'd always loved how alive it looked; how it kept moving and changing no matter what else happened around it.

“What if I never figure out a way to get your human form back?” I asked him, knowing he wouldn't respond. “What if all of Tendira is stuck as wolves, and I'm stuck as a human? Beasts, that would suck. I'd definitely lose my mind.”

I scratched his head, my thoughts continuing to move like the ocean below us. “It could take years to find the information I need. Maybe longer. Maybe I never will.” I was quiet for a few minutes before I spoke again. “I can't give up, though. You wouldn't give up on me if I was the one locked up in a wolf, so I can't give up on you. Even if I have to read every damn history book in Tendira, I'll find something that will give me a clue about what I need to do.”

I eased myself back to my feet. The crash-landing left my body feeling a bit achy, but Tuslan had taken the brunt of the impact, so I wasn't in terrible shape.

When I opened the door, the wolf slipped in first. He stalked around the cave, and I was pretty sure he was looking for intruders while he did it.

He disappeared up the stairs, and I followed him. It was still freezing cold inside the lair, so I was going to put my stuff down, pull my socks and fuzzy robe on, and then head down to the treasure trove.

When I made it to the bedroom, he was already nudging his way between the blankets on the bed, getting settled beside the spot I assumed he wanted to be mine.

“I have to go get some books first,” I told him.

He gave me a look that I could only call a pout, and I smiled. “I’ll snuggle with you while I read the books I need to grab, but for the record, you’re more fun to cuddle with when you’re in human form. Preferably, naked. If you feel like shifting, just go ahead. At any time.”

I knew it was a long shot, but how could it happen at all if I didn’t put it out into the universe like that?

The wolf huffed at me.

After dressing in the ultra-warm clothes Tuslan had gotten for me the last time I was in his lair, I dropped my backpack against one wall and slipped out of the room with an empty book bag on my shoulders. A grumbling wolf followed me down both sets of stairs, and we started the long walk toward the books.



5

When we finally made it to the library portion of the treasure hoard, I wished I'd brought a blanket so I could sit and read there instead of going all the way back to the bed so soon. But without a blanket, it was too cold to sit down at all.

I loaded the bag with the most promising-sounding history books I could find, and then draped it over Tuslan's neck when he wouldn't take no for an answer.

We trucked back toward the bed, and my feet grew slower by the damned minute. A yawn stretched my lips, and Tuslan growled at me.

"It was a yawn," I complained. "Everyone yawns."

He growled again, but we kept walking.

It didn't occur to me until we were halfway back that I was traveling ultra-slowly with a gigantic, strong, super-speedy wolf.

What the hell was I doing?

"Hey, can you walk us back?" I asked out of the blue, stopping in my tracks.

Tuslan's head tilted to the side, confused.

"Here." I put my hands on his back and pushed gently, trying to tell him to squat down a bit. He followed my hands downward, and I slipped a leg over his back.

He sank lower when he realized I was climbing on.

Good; he was giving me permission, and access.

As soon as my arms were wrapped securely around him, he took off. Adrenaline pumped through me as we raced through the cavern, and we reached the bed only a few minutes later.

"Beasts," I gave a breathy laugh. "I always forget how fast you are."

He bumped me with his nose, nudging me toward the bed. I let him drive me over to it, and slipped under the blankets obediently before reaching for the book bag hanging from his neck. He lowered his head to help me get the bag off easier, and then licked my nose. I scratched his head.

"I guess if you're my only companion for the rest of my human life, I could do worse," I teased him.

He licked my cheek, then, and jumped up on the bed beside me. Getting cozy under the blanket with me, he wiggled right up against me so I had complete access to his body heat.

I continued to scratch his head with one hand while I pulled a book out of the bag with the other one, and then opened the book one-handedly so I could keep scratching Tuslan. He fell

asleep quickly as I started reading about the origin of shifters, and eventually, my eyes grew too heavy to hold them open too.

Tuslan and I fell into a pattern for the next few days. We ate, slept, and read. My magic recovered entirely from the Tidals' attack, and I could feel it growing stronger by the day as my transition to Shifter Queen ended.

Tuslan went out hunting after he made sure I ate breakfast and dinner, coming back just as clean as he'd been when he left each time. I assumed that meant he was hunting in his dragon form, with his fire to help.

As I read, I learned more about shifters and about Tendira, but other than mentions about the Queens and their barrier magic, I didn't read a thing about how they had come to be or what had given them access to the shifters' humanity in the first place.

By the time a week had passed, I'd moved half of our blankets down to the couches in the cave's middle level, and left the door open most of the time to let the fresh salty air inside.

The history books were far from fast reads, and I'd only managed to make it through the entirety of about ten of them in a week, though I'd been sleeping a lot too.

The Origin of Shifters was the book that I thought would probably give me the best information, but it put me to sleep within ten minutes of opening it every time I tried.

In an attempt to force myself to stay awake and read, I sat on the floor in my panties and buried my nose in my fuzzy robe while the icy ground froze my thighs and ass. I cracked The Origin of Shifters open again, trying not to groan as I did.

Beasts, I hated reading nonfiction.

My jaw clenched as the cold numbed my poor bare legs, and Tuslan gave me an agitated nose-bump as he tried to get me back onto the couch. He hated it when I was cold.

“I’m fine,” I said through gritted teeth.

He growled in response, and I scratched behind his ears to quiet him. I’d learned that he couldn’t resist a good ear scratch.

And that I liked him better as a human. At least then, we could banter when he tried to order me around or got too worried about me. When he was a wolf, it got really old.

The Origin of Shifters started by talking about the group of humans who had emigrated to Tendira. I’d never heard about them before, but the book went into far too many details about their ages, physical descriptions, and etcetera. They hoped for a land of riches, and found a land of monsters instead. That, I could understand.

I struggled through a gruesome, twenty-page description of their first encounter with a jevrana, and the celebratory feast that followed, and then skimmed over fifty pages about an argument that revolved around whether or not a jevrana was at all related to a pig.

The book caught my attention again with the first mention of magic.

I had to skip back a few pages to see what I’d missed, and found a long, drawn-out description about a mountain the group of humans had come across. There was a sketch of it, but I didn’t recognize it. I’d never been to the Valley, Lava, or Fringe

pack, and theirs were the lands that held most of Tendira's mountains. Blood and Royal had rolling hills, and Pine was flat as a palmcake.

My eyes flicked over to Tuslan. He'd lived in Lava, and from the sound of it, had probably seen part of the Valley land and Fringe land. Maybe he had seen the mountain the humans had described.

But even if he had, it wasn't like he could tell me where it was while he was in wolf form.

Turning back to the book, I kept reading.

Some kind of monster—they didn't name it, but it sounded like a lyone based on the long-winded description—came charging at them, and they went up the mountain to hide. They watched in awe as the Lyone came after them, and ran into an invisible wall that stopped the monster from going any further.

They looked around the mountain, and realized that it was free of all animal life. That prompted them to stay there for a few weeks while they recovered from their many encounters with Tendira's nastiest creatures.

When those weeks were over, the group then decided to climb the mountain to figure out what was keeping the beasts out.

I skimmed another two hundred pages about the group's journey up the mountain. When they reached the top, they found the source of the magic: a temple made out of gold. It wasn't large, but was built to resemble the tip of the mountain, and made the monstrous rock formation look like it had been dipped in liquid gold.

In the center of the temple, they found a large, rounded black stone: a black diamond, I'd assume. It pulsed with magic and spoke into their minds, asking what they desired. When they replied that they wanted a way to be one with the creatures, to survive Tendira's wilderness, the gemstone said they would have what they wanted, and then went silent.

They made their way off the mountain, and the moment they stepped out of the invisible walls, they all shifted to wolves.

The book continued with a description of their lives as wolves.

I flipped through the pages, waiting for the introduction of the first Shifter or Human Queen. Frustration built within me when I reached the last page, and it just ended. They hadn't shifted back to their human forms in the rest of the book; how was that the origin of shifters?

With a groan, I tossed the book to the floor and shoved my hands through my hair. I'd suffered through hours of slogging through the book, along with a frozen ass and legs, for *that*?

"We've got to go back down to the bookshelves," I told Tuslan, standing and tugging my pants back on. It was too late for my poor, numb backside, but maybe I'd warm up if I was clothed. "I need to figure out if this brilliant moron," I pointed to the bottom edge of the book, where the author's name was listed, "wrote any more books."

If he had, I just had to hope Tuslan had them in his collection.

The wolf just stared at me, of course. He knew what "book" meant now; I'd been staring at them for a week, after all, blabbing on about them enough for him to know what I was talking about. But the rest of the words, he didn't know.

I loaded books back into the bag and put it over Tuslan's head. Understanding what I wanted, then, he lowered his body so I could climb on his back. When I was on securely, he trotted down the stairs. He wasn't in a hurry, and I enjoyed the movement after so much sleeping and reading.

When we got to the bookshelves again, I searched for hours. I opened every book, looking for the name or handwriting of the asshole who wrote *The Origin of Shifters*, but came up emptyhanded.

With a groan, I dropped to my ass on the floor again. At least that time, there was a layer of fabric between me and the icy stones.

“An entire week,” I told Tuslan, frustration building inside me. “We've been doing this an entire week, and all I know is that shifters came from some magical golden mountain. We don't even know if that's where the Queens came from, or how Queen magic began, or how to tether shifters to me so you can access your human forms again!”

I was getting more upset by the moment, and apparently, Tuslan could tell. He snuggled up beside me as frustrated tears flooded my eyes.

“What am I supposed to do about this, Red? There aren't even any legends about how the Queens came to be. What if no one knows? What if there's no way to do it? What if I can never have you back? The real you—not just the furry you.”

His head snuggled against my neck.

“I don’t want to do this alone,” I told him, burying my face into his fur as the damned tears began to fall.

I let my emotions overwhelm me for a few minutes before finally easing away from the wolf trying to comfort me, and then wiping at my eyes. “A plan. I need a plan.”

Having a plan was what helped me survive when I’d been alone on the Blood beach after Cina was killed; it would help me survive this too.

“A week isn’t really that long to search a continent’s records,” I said aloud, forcing myself to my socked feet. I began to pace, hoping the movement would kick my brain into working better. “I’ll spend two more weeks here, looking for details about the Queens. And if I don’t find anything, I’ll go looking for the gold-dipped mountain and the talking diamonte on top of it.”

I didn’t know why talking out loud helped, but it did. It always had.

“I’m going to be fine,” I told myself. “I’m going to get Tuslan back to his human form, and I’m going to save the damn world. Tendira for the win. Humans for the win. Woo.” I tried to cheer, but didn’t have the level of excitement I really needed to pull it off.

I didn’t care, though, because I knew I would survive.



6

My two weeks of research turned into three weeks when I realized I could get through Tuslan's whole history collection if I stayed all of the days. I'd feel like a moron if I left without reading a book that could have the answers I needed, so I read them all.

By the end of the three weeks, I was out of the food and water I'd been rationing. But I was leaving anyway, so I told myself it was fine.

My mind spun with historical facts and information I'd probably never need to know as I packed up my stuff. I'd washed all my clothes in the sink the night before, so they were dry and at least somewhat clean.

Leaving my socks and fuzzy sweater on the bed, along with the pile of blankets, I put on the boots I'd brought with me and tied them tightly before tugging my coat on over my bandeau.

If there was still a barrier over the gold-tipped mountain, I'd need shoes and a coat to hike it, after all.

Tuslan seemed to understand that we were leaving, even though he still didn't know what I was saying most of the time. He lowered himself so I could climb on his back, and then he threw us off the porch.

The ocean flew toward us until Tuslan's body shimmered and shifted, and then my arms were wrapped around smooth red scales instead of soft white fur.

A laugh slipped out of me.

Beasts, I'd missed flying.

Like I'd missed Tuslan and the rest of my favorite pack's shifters. I'd chop my hair off if it meant I could have a real human conversation with the Blood Alpha or any of his lead wolves.

Three weeks was a long time to be alone in a cave with only a beast for a companion.

A few days earlier, I'd painted my best depiction of what I thought the gold-tipped mountain might look like, since I hadn't been able to find any pencils but knew where the paints were. I'd shown it to Tuslan about a hundred times in the days since, and he rolled his wolfy eyes at me every time. I guess he knew where I wanted to go.

If that meant he actually knew where it was, I didn't know. But I was really hoping the mountain would at least give me a way to get Tuslan back, because I was sure he would know where to go for more information about the history of the Queens.

We flew all day, only stopping when my stomach rumbled. When that happened, he dropped us to the ground, then proceeded to roast some poor animal and put it in front of me, like he was proud of the kill. Without his human mind, he probably was.

I tried my best to hide my gagging while I tried to eat the burnt meat. I didn't want to offend him; he was just a sweet creature who wanted to provide for me, after all.

When we stopped for the night, he remained in his dragon form. I didn't think it would be comfortable to snuggle up with a scaly dragon, but then he stretched his wing out over me and pulled me up close to him. The wing-tent was basically a silky, warm sleeping bag that smelled like my favorite person, and it made sleeping on the dirt much more bearable.

After I was up the next morning, we flew all day again.

I was starting to wonder if Tuslan knew where he was going at all when we got up the next day, but when I asked, he just snorted at me and used his wing to scoop me up and drop me on his back.

Halfway through that day, I caught sight of a mountain that stretched far above the others we'd been flying over. My eyes followed it up, but the clouds hid the top.

"Is that the gold mountain?" I yelled to Tuslan.

He answered by flying higher. We rose into the clouds, and my lips parted as more and more of the mountain was exposed.

My breathing grew shallower as we rose. The air grew colder, but Tuslan's body heated for me.

He stopped rising when I grew dizzy. He must've heard my heart pounding rapidly. My head tilted backward, and backward, and backward, and I finally caught the tiniest glimpse of gold.

Beasts, that was a tall mountain.

Tuslan descended slowly. I wasn't sure why we were going so slow, but I assumed it had something to do with the way my body was struggling to take in air.

When my breathing finally evened, I called out, "Fly us back up!"

He ignored me, continuing to descend.

"Tuslan!" I yelled.

He stopped moving downward, and carefully stretched his wing out toward the mountain.

I felt the air change, and my eyes widened when a glass-looking barrier appeared as his wing bounced off the wall.

"Beasts," I breathed.

Now that I knew the magic was there, my eyes tracked the barrier. It stretched as far as I could see in every direction, wrapping around the mountain from the base and climbing far up into the clouds.

"They weren't kidding about the wall," I murmured. It definitely seemed to keep Tuslan out—which was not a good thing for me. At all.

I'd either have to make a run for it to get myself through—assuming it let me through at all—or I'd have to figure out a way to get him in.

And something told me the only way he even might get in was if he was in human form.

Tuslan continued descending until he landed at the base of the mountain. He seemed to know exactly where the barrier was, and landed us only a few feet away from it.

I slid off his back, and he helped me land smoothly. His wing remained between me and the barrier, which told me he knew I was considering making a run for it. It wouldn't be the first time, so it was a fair assumption.

"I just want to see if it lets my hand through," I told him. That was the truth. My odds of surviving a climb up a mountain like that alone were next to zero, if not *below* zero.

Tuslan let me get close, but his wing didn't budge from its secure spot between my torso and the barrier.

I reached over the wing, my fingers brushing the magic. It let me through, but the moment I touched it, I felt something strange. It rippled where it met my hand, and the scent and feeling of something old and infinitely strong washed over me.

Tears sprung in my eyes. Not because I was sad; because of the power of the magic in the air, in the barrier, around me. The space felt sacred.

I pulled my hand back and the feeling faded but didn't leave me entirely. Even being in the vicinity of that kind of magic made me feel different.

My stomach rumbled, then, and Tuslan swept me up, depositing me on his back as he took off into the air.

I knew what was coming, and wore a deep grimace. Lowering my face to his warm, smooth scales, I held his neck loosely and closed my eyes so I could think without being distracted by the beauty of the view and the barrier that felt so much older and more powerful than even Tuslan, who was the strongest shifter I knew.

I had to figure out a way up the mountain. I felt sure of that, now that I'd felt its magic. If anything could connect me back to the shifters running savage around Tendira, it was whatever powered this mountain. And I felt connected to it somehow, on a deep, soulful level.

But to get up the mountain, I'd need help.

The magic had rippled for me. It had responded to my power, which made me feel pretty sure I could get Tuslan through. But making it up the mountain was going to take more than my dragonish, wolfish mate's animal mind. I needed my male back.

I'd never played around with the space where a person's forms met. That place felt sacred, like the old magic I'd just found. But if someone could make a barrier that kept out shifters yet allowed humans, surely I could come up with one to reattach Tuslan's human form to those of his beasts.

My magic slipped into his consciousness while he hunted for us. I found the spot immediately, and saw his human form still separate from the others. I went ahead and tried my typical method again, just to make sure it still wasn't working.

As expected, it didn't happen, so I moved on.

I'd need some sort of net to drag his human form back to the others. Something sort of like what I'd done when the factions had been burning.

My magic cupped his humanity as I focused, and I wrapped the barrier around the rest of his forms. Slowly, I tightened the magic, forcing every part of him to move together. The barrier knitted as if it had come to life, separating his other forms the way they were meant to be separated as it put Tuslan's humanity back in place.

His human form lit up like a lightbulb, then, and the scales beneath my cheeks and arms were replaced immediately by human flesh.

I didn't let Tuslan's skin distract me; I finished the edges of the barrier, and got myself used to holding the magic in place before I let my mind leave his consciousness and opened my eyes.



7

They landed on a pair of dark, emotion-filled orbs.

When our eyes collided, Tuslan crushed me to his chest and held me so tightly I couldn't breathe.

"You died." His voice was rough and uneven.

"You saved me." My eyes stung with tears as I held him just as tightly as he held me.

"Let me see you." He abruptly drew back, holding me out in front of him. His eyes blazed as he took in the inky markings on my abdomen. "Fuck, Blue. You're mine."

"You don't have to sound so shocked about it," I said, pulling his chest back to mine and holding on tight again. "I always knew you'd win the contest."

He snorted, and I bit my lip as a smile tugged my mouth upward. "You never were a good liar."

"Yet I managed to trick you into believing I was a shifter."

He gave me a full-chested laugh. "Does it count as a trick if someone knows you're lying?"

“You knew I was lying, but you didn’t figure out the truth. So yeah, I’d say it counts.” I nibbled on his neck just to tease him, and felt his erection flare to life against my inner thigh. A grin split my lips.

“Beasts, I missed you.” I squeezed him tighter.

“What all happened? I remember you dying, and my humanity was lost with you, but after that...” He shook his head, and his scruffy chin scratched my cheek a bit. “I only have bits and pieces.” He paused. “Did you *jump out a window*?”

“In the tower I think the desedra sent you to,” I admitted sheepishly. “I needed you to shift to your dragon, but you didn’t understand me. I was pretty sure I could catch myself with my barriers.”

His arms tightened around me. “How did the Tidals get to you? What happened? The desedra led me to an empty tower, and you were supposed to be there. I felt the magic connect us, but couldn’t reach you.”

“I think the Tidals figured out a way to tap into the magic somehow,” I admitted. “I was in the tower opposite yours, and they knew I’d be there. I thought about jumping out, but I was pretty sure the fall would knock me out. I should’ve just done it; they managed to kill me anyway.”

“I’m never leaving your fucking side again,” he growled at me. “Ready to do the Amra?”

I shook my head. “I can’t until we figure out how to bind all of the shifters back to me. You’re only you right now because I

rigged a barrier to connect your human form back to your others; if I let it go, you'll go savage again."

He gave an unhappy rumble. "How are we going to do that?"

"I'm not sure, but I think this mountain will help somehow." I glanced up at the mountain stretching up further than I could see.

Tuslan's nose twitched, and his gaze swept the area around us as he finally loosened his hold on me and let me take a tiny step back. "We're in Lava territory?"

I shrugged. "I told you to take me to the golden-tipped mountain, and you brought me here. I couldn't exactly ask where it was."

He jerked his head in a nod. "Death Mountain is at the heart of the Lava territory; the very center. That's Bloodletter and Breakneck." He gestured to tall mountains on either side of the beast towering over us. I couldn't see the tops of any of them from the ground, but from the air, I'd seen the tops of the other two.

"Great names," I said dryly.

His lips quirked upward. "I told you Lava favors cruelty."

"Did you kill the Alpha when you were questioning him? You never told me whether or not you let him walk away."

"Because I'd rather you not focus on how many people I've killed. Violence turns you off."

“You think?”

He flashed me a smirk. “I’d love to hear about your conquests, though. Imagining you with those cute little claws of yours in someone’s throat gets me going.”

I snorted, knowing he was joking. He liked it when I acted bossy and loved the feel of my power, but he wasn’t anywhere near bloodthirsty enough to be turned on by murder. At least... I didn’t *think* he was. “I’m sure.”

He caught my hand and intertwined our fingers, then lifted our hands so his lips brushed them. “So you want me to help you climb Death Mountain?”

“Unfortunately.” My eyes tracked the mountain. “She needs a better name though. Gold Mountain?”

“She’s the tallest in Tendira; you can’t name her something as simple as Gold.”

“Soul Mountain, then.” I paused, my heartbeat picking up. “I felt magic in the barrier, Tuslan. So much magic. It was ancient, and strong enough to take my breath away. If there’s a human or shifter holding up that barrier, he or she is strong enough to take out all of us.”

“Soul Mountain it is.”

My stomach rumbled, and his hand tightened on mine. “And I still haven’t learned how to feed you properly,” he growled.

I laughed. “You were going hunting, literally feeding me. And for the record, your dragon is shitty at cooking for me, though I

was careful not to let him know that.”

Tuslan shot me a smirk as we started hiking through the forest, back toward Soul Mountain. “You prefer me in this form?”

“Don’t act surprised. This form has *many* advantages.”

His smirk grew wicked. “Glad you haven’t forgotten.”

“You made that pretty *hard*.” I paused, grinning widely. “Get it?”

He chuckled. “I love you, Leviathan.”

“And I love you, Red. Thanks for taking care of me even without remembering how you feel about me.”

“I expect payment in the form of kisses and tit-grabs.”

“You want me to grab your boobs?” I teased.

He flashed me a fanged grin. “No, I want to watch you grab your own breasts.”

Oh.

I stumbled over a tree-branch, and he caught me easily.

“You’re too sexy for my health,” I grumbled.

“When I’ve made you mine, I’ll make it up to you with better senses and endurance.”

“Is that really for me, though? I feel like the endurance thing is more for you.”

He laughed again. Despite our upcoming trek up the tallest mountain in Tendira, he was more relaxed than I’d seen him since before he knew who I really was. “It’s for both of us. It’ll be nice not having to worry about breaking you.”

“I didn’t know you were worried about that.”

“Of course I am. You’re my very human female, and I’m not known for my gentleness. I take care not to hurt you every time we’re together.”

I remembered the times he’d squeezed me and then assumed he’d hurt me, then used his flames to heal me. “You think you’re rougher with me than you actually are.”

“Yet you still deserve someone kinder.”

“Someone kinder wouldn’t have done whatever it took to win the desedra for me, the way you did. You kept me alive, and then literally brought me back to life after I died, Tuslan. You’re exactly who I want and deserve, so shut up about it unless you want me to rage at you.”

He shot me a contemplative look. “You’re sexy when you’re angry...”

My stomach growled again, and he swore under his breath just as we reached the edge of the barrier.

“You vow to me that you’re not going to try to climb this mountain without me while I find you food?” he asked, staring daggers at me.

“I don’t have a death wish, Red.”

“Say the words, Blue.”

I sighed dramatically. “I vow not to try to slip away from you. Just don’t go too far, okay? The further you get, the more your barrier will drain me.” I tapped the center of his deliciously-bare chest.

He caught my fingers and kissed their tips. “I’ll stay close. You stay just inside this barrier, so I know you’re safe.” He led me backward with a soft hand on my abdomen, over my lalidro. I took two steps backward, and then his hand met the barrier instead of my skin.

“I’ll be quick.” He disappeared into the trees.

I sat down on the ground, feeling like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders now that Tuslan was with me. I didn’t have to deal with everything on my own anymore—I had him to help me, and hold me, and thankfully, feed me.

My back was resting against a tree when he returned carrying a massive slab of meat on a giant toa leaf. My mouth watered at the smell coming off the steaming food. “You’re a saint. I’ll give you anything you want.”

“I want a kiss.” He held a hand out.

I stepped out from behind the barrier to take it and let him tow me to a relatively smooth and flat area of the forest.

When he was satisfied with where he'd taken me, he set the leaf down on a thick rock, and lowered his ass to the dirt beside it.

"I guess I can give you that kiss." I sat down on his lap, ignoring the meat for a minute. "But I want you to mark me with your scent, too. And your teeth."

His eyes darkened, and he swept a few loose strands of hair off my neck as he tilted my head to the side. His nose met my throat, and I waited while he breathed his fill.

"I know this is a position of submission," I remarked.

"I'd never ask you to submit to me, unless you were offering. This is just the second-best place to take in your scent." His tongue licked up my neck. "And taste you."

"Then what's the first?" I countered.

He rocked me gently against his erection. "Right there."

Oh.

Yeah, I liked that.

He kissed my throat. "Though if you ever felt like submitting, all you'd have to do is say the words. I'm not against experimenting."

“I guess we have that in common, then.” I turned my head back so I could look at his face. “I’m excited to get back home when all of this is over and spend a few days in bed with you.”

His lips lifted in a smirk. “A few days? Think bigger, Leviathan. I plan on locking you in my tower with me for at least a few weeks after our Amra.”

My lips curved upward. “Think bigger, Leviathan. Why not make it a few months?”

His eyes gleamed wickedly. “Spending a few months getting to know your beautiful body without anyone else around sounds incredible. I’ll be taking you up on that offer.”

I grinned. “Bastard.”

“Yes, but I’m your bastard.” His hands caught my face, and his lips met mine.

They were gentle at first—too gentle.

I grabbed him by the hair and pulled him closer, plunging my tongue into his mouth.

His hands moved to my tits, squeezing and playing with them before wrapping around my ass. The kiss grew hotter as we moved together, our bodies getting reacquainted through our clothes while our food cooled beside us.

Food...

My stomach growled again, and Tuslan's fingers tightened on my ass. I pulled my mouth off his before he could take his away, and then put a finger to his lips. "Shh. I distracted you. Keeping me fed isn't your job; making me feel good is."

"Both are my job," he growled back. "Now, eat your food before it cools."

I rolled my eyes, but turned on his lap so I could grab a strip of meat.



8

After we ate, we headed toward the barrier. I was pretty sure I'd have to manipulate the magic to convince it to let Tuslan in, but based on the way it had reacted to me, I wasn't too worried.

"Just put your hand on it," I told him, wanting to see the barrier's effect on him up close. I'd seen his wing brush against it before, but he'd been moving too fast. "I want to see how the magic reacts."

He grimaced, but set his hand on the shield.

Ripples went out from the place his skin came in contact with it, the way water responded to a rock being dropped in. I waited for the ripples to subside, the way they would in the water, but they continued.

"What does it feel like?" I checked.

"Death. That's why we gave it its name. Every Lead Wolf in Lava is forced to spend a week maintaining physical contact with the mountain's barrier; It's driven many to insanity over the centuries."

I ripped his hand away from the barrier. "Why did you touch it then?" Peering at his skin, I checked for changes or signs of the unfortunate feeling. It seemed unaffected, though.

He lifted an eyebrow at me. “I was a Lead in Lava. I’ll never forget the mental torture of the week, but the mountain’s effect doesn’t scare me.”

“Are there any other places like this?” I asked. “With barriers?”

“I’ve heard stories about a cave in Sand Territory that’s similarly shielded, but if it exists, the Sand Pack doesn’t actively use it or watch it in any way. Paik doesn’t know its location, and he was one of their Leads.”

I nodded, taking that in.

If we didn’t find the answers we needed on Soul Mountain, we’d have to look for Sand’s cave.

“Can you manipulate the barrier?” he asked.

I put my hand on it, and willed it to open under my palm.

The glass-looking shield didn’t budge at all, and then a hole slowly began to grow beneath my touch. My eyebrows knitted in concentration as it began tugging on my energy.

That time, it was Tuslan who yanked my hand away.

“I felt that,” he growled. “That thing was eating at you, Mesa.”

I shook my head. “That’s the same feeling I get from my own barriers. It was just draining my energy at a much faster pace

than my magic usually does.”

“Did it feel like that when you worked on one of Cina’s?”

I shrugged. “Cina never let me touch her barriers.”

He stepped up to my back, placing his hands over the marking on my abdomen. His magic soaked into my skin, and my head tilted back as the calmness of his fire washed over me. “We shouldn’t be able to feel each other’s energy without the lalidro completed.”

“I can’t feel your energy,” I murmured.

“Reach out to me the way you did when you demanded my fire.”

When I’d been dying.

He didn’t want to say that, exactly—and I understood why. It was a shitty memory for me too.

I closed my eyes and tried to find the connection. It was in my abdomen, where the marking was, and it pulsed softly.

Like a heartbeat.

I followed the pulsing beats straight to Tuslan. His heart beat steadily, but the magic felt weak to me.

Would it strengthen when we mated?

“Most people believe that when a lalidro blossoms, it connects two people’s magic,” I reminded him. “I guess they’re right.”

“Then why didn’t anyone else’s magic latch onto yours?” he pressed.

“I guess none of them were as obsessed with me as you were,” I drawled.

“That may be true, but I’ve never seen proof that an ink lalidro connects power.”

“We live in a land of magic and monsters, Tuslan, and we’re both powerful in our own ways. It makes sense that it’s easier for us to feel the magical connection than it is for others.”

He was silent for a moment. “We need to complete the Amra,” he finally said.

“I can’t risk sealing my power the way it is,” I reminded him. “If we can’t bind the shifters back to me, I’ll have to hold up this barrier constantly just to keep you in human form.”

“And I can’t risk your life.” His chin rested on my head. “If I’m separated from you, I won’t handle it well.”

“If you’re separated from me, I’ll have to let go of the barrier that’s keeping you human right now.”

He snarled softly. “We need a rope.”

“You’re not putting me on a damn leash, Tuslan.” I stepped out of his arms, and he reluctantly let me go. “It’s going to drain me pretty thoroughly to break you into this thing, so get ready to move.”

He sighed. “Must you save the world?”

“Must you be so difficult?” I slapped my hands to the barrier again, closing my eyes and tugging on the barrier.

Like before, it slowly began to melt away.

“Stay human. I don’t know what will happen if you shift while on Soul Mountain, but I don’t get the feeling that it’ll be good.”

“Noted.”

I continued whittling away at the power, even as my own energy began to fade. I had a lot more than I’d had before the transition finished, which was nice—I probably wouldn’t have gotten him onto the mountain while transitioning.

“Can you see it?” I asked, my jaw clenching with the effort of holding the hole in the magic open.

“No.”

“It’s about the size of me, and starts just to my left. Turn sideways and try to slip through.”

Tuslan released me, ducking his head and sliding through the gap in the magic. He swore when his skin brushed it, jerking

backward, and then swearing some more when his back touched it.

By the time he squeezed through, he was sweating.

I dropped the gap, breathing a sigh of relief at the lightness on my shoulders without the weight of the magic draining me.

Stepping through the barrier, I let the odd sacredness of the magic brush over me. Tuslan caught me in his arms, and immediately, energy flowed slowly into me through the connection between us.

The feel of it took my breath away.

“What are you doing?”

“Helping.” His lips met my forehead, then my cheek, and then the top of my head.

A cracking branch off to our sides jerked our attention away from each other.

“What was that?” I breathed.

“A wild animal, I’m sure. They gather here, for safety from the Lava shifters.”

I guess I couldn’t blame them for that.

“There weren’t any animals here in the Origin of Shifters book.”

“The accuracy of that book is questioned by pretty much all historians.”

Hmm. Well, that wasn't good.

Another branch cracked.

“Can you tell what it is from here?” I knew all his senses were heightened.

“The magic in here smells strongly, and makes it difficult to differentiate scents. I think it's a turkro, but I'm not positive. It'll take me some time to orient to the smells here.”

My eyebrows shot upward.

I'd never seen a turkro in person, and had no desire to.

Another branch snapped, and Tuslan put me behind him.

“Not a turkro,” he muttered, and his body shimmered.

Alarm flooded me. “No, remember, I said not to—”

The barrier's magic slammed into him as he finished shifting forms, and I screamed as it sent Tuslan launching through the air, shooting him off the mountain. He soared far away from me, out of sight.

The pull of the magic required to hold up that barrier within him grew drastically stronger, and I sucked in air as the wild

animal flew out from behind a bush.

A golden cat as big as Tuslan in his wolf form—massive—flew toward me. The mane of amber hair curling around its face only made it seem bigger, and scarier.

That wasn't a turkro; it was a damned lyone.

And it crashed into me, slamming my body to the ground. My head spun, and I heard shouting as the magic barrier stretching above me rippled.

The Lyone's teeth chomped down toward my throat, and I thickened the barrier that constantly covered my skin.

As his teeth bounced off my barrier, I felt some kind of a rush within me, and my body caught fire.

The Jevrana roared as it burst into flames, and it stumbled away from me. I scrambled up to a sitting position, staring at it in horror, while flames continued blazing off my skin.

“Mesa!” Tuslan yelled, and my head jerked toward the barrier. His fists pounded into it, and there was a wild look in his eyes that I hadn't seen in a long time.

Climbing to my feet, I stumbled back to the barrier and slipped out.

The flames vanished as he engulfed me in his arms. His heart pounded fiercely against my cheek as he held me tight, clutching me to him.

“I have my own magic,” I reminded him softly. “I can protect myself.”

“You shouldn’t have to,” he growled back. “I thought the magic might hurt me if I shifted—I didn’t think it would throw me.”

“Maybe you should listen to me next time.”

He growled again. “Maybe I should tie you to me with a rope next time.”

I punched him in the side, not hard enough to hurt. “You’re not tying me up any more than you’re throwing me in a tower, Red. I’m not your prisoner; I’m your almost-mate.”

“My almost-mate who got herself killed, then proceeded to jump out of a window, and—”

“And you should really stop being an asshole to the woman you want to mate with you.”

He breathed in and then let out a slow breath. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“Good.” I wrapped my arms around his waist, and he set his chin on my head as he held me. “How did you set me on fire?”

“I didn’t.”

I frowned against his chest. “You must’ve.”

“I didn’t push the fire at you, Mesa. You didn’t tug at my magic, either. Those flames weren’t mine.”

My eyebrows shot upward. “Then whose were they?”

He sniffed my hair. “They didn’t leave behind a scent.”

My eyes lifted up to the mountain. Though I couldn’t see its gold tip from where I was, I knew it was there. “Do you think they belong to whoever turned the first humans into shifters?”

I realized he might not know that story, despite the book being in his collection. But before I could voice the question, he said, “I think they were yours.”

My eyebrows lifted. “I don’t have fire, Tuslan.”

His lips quirked upward dangerously. “You were resurrected by phoenix flames, Mesa. Your magic feels different now—and not just because I have a better connection to it.”

“You think I’m a phoenix?” I demanded.

“I don’t know what you are. But you still smell human—and you’re still mine. That’s what matters.”

“That doesn’t feel like what matters right now.” I gestured between the two of us. “You’re telling me that I caught myself on fire.”

“It could’ve been the protector of Death Mountain—Soul Mountain.” He shrugged. “I don’t know for sure. But the magic either has no scent... or it smells like you.”

Shit, that was a lot to take in.

“Let’s deal with that later.” I stepped away from Tuslan. He caught my hand; I guess holding hands could be like a rope for us.

“Time to start hiking?” he asked me.

“Yup.”

His head tilted backward a bit, watching the mountain where it disappeared into the clouds far above our head. “It’s a long way up, Blue. This won’t be a short hike, or an easy one.”

“But it’s possible, right?”

“Yes. When I was a lead, we summited Bloodletter and Breakneck to see if it was possible to reach altitudes that high in human form.”

“And is it?”

“Yes. It gets a bit harder to breathe if you go too fast, but it’s possible. I don’t like the idea of taking you up while I’m trapped in this form, though.” His gaze dipped to mine.

“Do you know anything about the origin of the Queens?” I asked.

“No. I’ve heard about a book that tells of it, but I don’t know of anyone who has held it in my lifetime,” he admitted. “I don’t have any other ideas.”

“Well, then this is our best bet.” I gestured toward the mountain. “Let’s go.”



9

We hiked until the sun went down. Though we came across signs of a ton of wild animals, none of them tried to attack us again. Tuslan decided that the lyone I'd scared away was probably a mama protecting her baby, and that was the only reason she'd been brave enough to attack a shifter. Most wild animals would take off when they smelled a shifter—which smelled like a human, according to Tuslan.

But he only knew that because of me; I was the only human he'd smelled away from the castle and other shifters.

As darkness began to set in, Tuslan gestured toward a large outcropping of rock. It looked like it could provide some measure of shelter, and was just off to the side of the path we were forging through the rocky forest. “Why don't we stop here?”

“You can see in the dark,” I pointed out.

“But you can't, and we both need sleep.”

He waited for my argument, but I finally nodded. He was right; no matter how much I wanted to, we couldn't just hike the whole mountain without pausing.

“Did you put any kind of sleeping gear in this backpack?” Tuslan asked me, slowing down as darkness began to set in.

I grimaced. “No. You were in beast form, so I figured I’d just snuggle up with you.”

He chuckled, wrapping his arms around me. My feet ached, and my pants were covered in these sharp, prickly bristle things that apparently grew in Lava. There were so many that I stopped bothering with pulling them off twenty minutes into the hike, though I had a few bleeding cuts to show for that.

My face met his bare chest as he held me close. Like mine, his skin had darkened slightly with the constant shine of the sun. He’d used his magic to heal us both a few times during the day so we’d skipped the red-stage of the sun’s effect.

“Sorry I didn’t bring a pillow,” I murmured, my eyes insanely heavy.

“I’m used to sleeping on the dirt, Blue. I was asking for you.”

“I’ll just sleep on top of you.”

He chuckled again, his hand sweeping down the back of my wild hair. I needed to throw it up in a ponytail, but didn’t have any kind of hair band. I’d forgotten that too.

Luckily Tuslan could still use his magic to cook food for us, or we’d starve with my lack of preparation.

He pulled me down with him, sitting me on his lap as he sat on the ground and leaned his back against the rock that jutted out in a natural canopy. “Can you hold the barrier on my magic while you sleep?”

I grimaced. “I don’t know.”

Shit, I hadn’t thought anything through.

“I can feed you my energy if I need to, Mesa. Stop feeling bad.” He pulled me back to his chest, squeezing me tight. He wasn’t sweaty, but I sure as shit was. “Why are you self-conscious now?”

“Fuck the lalidro,” I muttered. “You can feel my emotions?”

“Yes. You can feel mine too, I’m sure.”

I leaned into the magic in my abdomen and sure enough, found Tuslan’s heartbeat within me. Beneath the steady thud of his heartbeat, was his emotions. They were hard to make out, but I was pretty sure I felt a whole lot of contentment coming from him. “It takes a lot of effort. You’re feeling peaceful?”

“Very.” His lips met my forehead. “Though I’ve got more energy than you, as well as more endurance, and strength. The hike was much harder on you than me.”

“Damn humanity,” I grumbled.

“You never told me why you’re embarrassed.”

I sighed. “Can’t you just drop it?”

He gave me a look that told me no, he couldn’t. But he was a five-form; he’d probably never dropped anything in his life.

“I’m sweaty and tired. You’re cool and collected. What don’t I have to be embarrassed about right now?” I finally asked, irritated. Not with him, but with my human-ness and imperfections.

Understanding dawned in his eyes. “I don’t want you to be perfect.”

“Do you hear how insane that sounds? Everyone wants perfection, that’s just a basic—“

He tilted his head toward me, and his tongue stroked up the side of my gross, sweaty neck.

“What the hell are you doing?”

He licked me again, and then caught my hand. He brushed my palm over his crotch, letting me feel his erection.

“My sweat makes you horny?” My eyebrows shot upward. “What? Why?”

“Because it’s you, Mesa. And there’s not a piece of you I don’t love.”

Love.

Right.

My chest would’ve warmed, if I wasn’t already sweating my tits off.

He licked my neck again, and I pushed his face away. “Would you quit that?”

His lips quirked upward in a dangerous smile. “Make me.” He licked me again, and I jerked backward in an attempt to dodge. Jerking backward threw me off balance, and my arms waved rapidly as I tried to catch myself.

Tuslan just rolled with me, cushioning my fall with his hands and leaning over the top of me.

“You can’t seriously be turned on,” I told him. “We spent all day hiking, and now we’re dirty and gross.”

His flames covered us, relaxing my body and soul as they burned away every bit of dirt, grease, and sweat.

“Well, that was nifty.”

He grinned down at me, and I loved the look so much I practically ached. “Am I allowed to be turned on now?”

“Not really. We’re still in the forest.”

“I’m a wolf, Mesa. Minus the odd magic in the air, I’m perfectly at home here.”

My stomach rumbled again, and his grin vanished.

“If you’re allowed to be horny in the forest without getting judged, I’m allowed to be hungry in the forest without you feeling like my body’s attacking you personally,” I grumbled, as he stood and offered me a hand.

I took it, and he eased me to my feet. Now that I was cleaned up for the most part, my whole body ached.

Tuslan's eyebrows knitted together, and he frowned at me. "Is that... are you sore?"

The dry look I gave him was apparently humorous, because it earned me a feral grin. "Beasts, you're gorgeous." His lips met mine. "Sit down and try to get comfortable. I'll get you something to eat."

He headed into the forest at his ridiculously-fast speed, and I called after him, "You have to eat too."

Dropping to my ass, I peeled my backpack off and propped it up against the rock behind me. With that to cushion me, it wasn't too uncomfortable.

I pulled off my boots and hung my socks over the top of them, and my eyes caught on the homemade hair-tie Tuslan had made me. It had been sitting on my ankle, where I'd left it after Tuslan made it. It felt like ages ago that he'd done that, but it couldn't have been more than a few months.

I maneuvered it off my ankle.

Thank the beasts for my male.

My sweaty hair went up in a bun, and I felt like a new person with the mass of tangled waves up off my neck. Breathing deeper, I reached my attention back to my abdomen. Tuslan seemed to have a better grasp on our connection than I did, but that wouldn't last long. And if he could figure it out, so could I.

I found his pulse in my abdomen, and focused on that. The steady thump of his heartbeat was calming, but also loud—it deafened me to the rest of the connection.

Timing my breathing with his heartbeat, I let my consciousness remain there until the noise settled into the background. His emotions slowly grew easier to make out as I got used to the thud of his heart, and I tried to sort through the immense amount of emotion.

Tuslan was feeling a lot of things.

Did everyone feel so many things?

I wasn't sure.

The main feeling was one of peace. He also felt... happy. And calm. He was focused on something. Hunting, probably. But that wouldn't cause him stress; he had a hell of a lot of experience hunting.

Beneath that focus, I found one that made me tear up a bit:

Love.

He had been telling the truth.

I mean, I hadn't doubted that he loved me. I'd believed him. But there was always this level of uncertainty. He was an ancient, legendary shifter, and I was just me. Clumsy, human me. And yeah, I loved me. But most other people didn't.

Except Tuslan.

He loved me.

And that was really damn incredible.

I found a few emotions beneath the love; protectiveness, possessiveness, and many others. Toward the bottom of his pile of emotions, was fear.

He'd told me about that fear, though. He was worried he'd hurt me, worried he wasn't taking good enough care of me. He was afraid he'd break me.

It wasn't an unfounded fear. Not really. I was human, and he was him.

But he was always careful, and though I was young, my magic packed a punch.

Beneath his emotions, I found the connection I'd used to reach out to him—and I realized what it was. His power.

“What are you doing?” he asked, sounding a bit amused.

I jerked to a seating position, my attention moving back to the real world. “Beasts, Tuslan.” I slammed my hand to my chest, over my pounding heart. “You scared the shit out of me. What have I said about walking louder?”

He flashed me a grin. “I *was* walking louder. You were in some kind of trance—I could feel how focused you were.”

“I was trying to figure out our lalidro.” I gestured to my abdomen. His eyes dipped there, and lingered. “I don’t know how you figured it out so quickly.”

“I have a lot of experience with my magic.” He lifted his shoulders. “And we weren’t hiking all that quickly, so I had time to figure it out.”

I sighed dramatically. “Always so overpowered.”

The words earned me another grin as he kneeled beside me, setting down a thick rock with a long, somewhat flat top. He set down a toa leaf on top of it, with some kind of meat on top of that. I didn’t recognize what it was, but it smelled good.

“That didn’t sound like a ‘thank-you’,” he remarked.

“Sorry, I’m grumpy when I’m tired. Thanks, Red.” I kissed him softly, and he deepened the kiss for a minute before pulling away and gesturing to the food.

“You can show your gratitude by filling your belly.”

I knew he’d been teasing, but focused briefly on our connection to make sure. It took a solid minute for me to get past his heartbeat and check.

Dammit, I was getting worse.

But he was right.

I ate as much as I could stomach, and he ate what I couldn’t when I was full. I hadn’t thought about packing water before

leaving Tuslan's hoard, but we'd followed a stream most of the day. It wasn't far from the rock we'd perched under.

I headed toward the stream, and Tuslan met me there a few minutes later. He tossed the rest of the animal carcass down the mountain to avoid luring animals toward us, and we both washed our hands and drank water. Coming straight out of the mountain, the water was cold and tasted incredible.

We made our way back to the rock we'd designated our camping spot hand-in-hand, and Tuslan was quiet while I focused on the new magic in my abdomen. His heartbeat remained the loudest noise, but when I really focused, I could feel the slightest bit of his happiness.

Tuslan sat down near the backpack I'd leaned up against the rock. I put on a pair of fresh clothes, feeling his eyes on my body while I dressed.

When I reached for the magic at my middle, the feeling of his desire nearly overpowered that of his heartbeat—so I guess some emotions were just louder.

“Wow,” I remarked, walking back to him and plopping down on his lap. My legs straddled his hips, but I wasn't about to get naked and freaky in the middle of the forest. I was an adventurous girl, but not *that* adventurous.

“What are you wowed about?” he asked, his voice silky and amused while his dark eyes swept my face. His hands found my bare waist, and remained there lazily.

“You're still turned on.”

He chuckled, his hands skimming up my sides. “I’m not under the impression that you’re going to have sex with me in this forest, Mesa. I’ve only recently discovered this side of myself, and it’s going to be a while until I understand it and get a hold on it.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “You’re having a sexual awakening?”

“Something like that.” His hands slid back down my waist, landing on the curve of my hip. “I’m not trying to objectify you. I’m just... horny.”

“I’d have to be a complete moron to think you were objectifying me.” I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and lowered my head to his chest. “Does it offend you that I’m not as... insatiable?”

“Not at all.” His lips met my forehead, and then my cheek. “You can find that in my emotions, if you look.”

My eyes were growing heavier, and I relaxed against him as his hand moved to my back and began to draw slow circles over it. “We’ll get this pillar business sorted, and then we’ll spend those months you promised me in my tower.”

I nodded.

“I need you to see if you can hold that barrier while you sleep before you fall, Leviathan,” he murmured.

Shit, the barrier.

Right.

I let my mind relax and waited for the barrier's pull. If the pull was very strong at all, my subconscious would release it at some point during the night to save me from an accidental death via barrier drain.

I felt the pull immediately. It was much stronger than the simple protection over my skin, and a grimace tugged my mouth down.

"I won't be able to hold it all night. I'm not sure how long my subconscious will let me hold it at all.

"Not ideal."

I nodded against Tuslan's shoulder. "Guess we've got to hike straight through."

"I'll rejuvenate you with my energy. I can probably get away with sleeping three or four hours."

"And keep us both walking?" I asked, lifting my head and giving him a look that I hoped portrayed how insane that sounded.

His lips curved upward. "It won't be ideal, but we should reach the top of the mountain within a week or two. Sooner, if you let me carry you."

Damn, that sounded good.

"Alright. You'll have to give me energy before you sleep if you want me to stay awake, though."

“Of course.” His lips met mine. “I’d ask for a trade, though.”

A trade?

I could get into that.

“What kind of trade?”



10

“I want to feel your magic on my skin,” he said. “The way you amplified it that first night in your room.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “You could ask for anything, and you ask to feel my magic?”

“I also want to bite and scent-mark you. You distracted me before I could, earlier. I’ll save the rest of my requests for later,” he said, flashing me a wry grin.

“I suppose that’s reasonable.” I feigned reluctance.

“Mmhm,” he agreed. His lips met my neck, and I tilted to give him better access. His tongue swirled over my sensitive skin, and I ramped up my magic. Making it feel powerful wasn’t difficult or draining, so I wasn’t afraid to put my all into that.

His fire coated my hands, and I let out a soft moan as his teeth slid into the side of my neck.

Beasts, that felt good.

His flames healed the bite right up, and his lips met my throat again as I leaned back. “You’re so beautiful,” he murmured.

“So are you,” I whispered back, pretty much in a daze.

His soft chuckle made my eyes close completely.

I was so tired. So...

The heartbeat in my abdomen grew sort of bigger, or louder, I guess, and sort of swelled.

I inhaled as life poured into me, restoring me better than any night of sleep ever had. My eyes opened, and I found myself staring at Tuslan’s eyelids.

His lips lifted in a small smile. “How does that feel?”

“Don’t pretend you aren’t already digging around in my emotions, Red.”

His chuckle made me grin. I stretched my arms out, testing my muscles. “Damn. I don’t think I’ve ever felt this good before.”

“You’re human,” he pointed out.

“You love humans.”

“I do.” His lips met mine softly.

And then, the unexpected happened: his lips parted in a yawn.

“Holy shit. I’ve witnessed the impossible.”

He opened his eyes to smirk at me. "I'm not infallible."

"Well I believe you now." I dug my fingers into his mess of hair. "You'd better go to sleep before I take over as the horny one."

His eyes darkened, but grew teasing. "I'll wait."

"Seriously, lay down and sleep, Red. You just gave me all your juice."

His lips lifted in a grin.

"Okay, that wasn't meant to be an innuendo. Shut up and go to sleep."

"I wasn't talking."

"Your eyes spoke for you."

He slowly lowered his back to the ground, pulling me down with him. He must've been really damn tired if he was agreeing without any more arguing. "If you hear anything that scares you, or even think you might have heard anything that could possibly scare you, you wake me up," he warned.

"Yeah, yeah," I mumbled into his chest.

"I'm serious, Mesa. I'm not going to sleep unless you agree to it."

"Alright. If I see, hear, or even *smell* anything that could possibly kill me, I'll nudge you awake."

His silence told me he was probably giving me a death-glare.

“I don’t want to die, Tuslan. And I know you can protect us better than I can, okay? So just close your eyes and go to sleep. If I need you awake, I’ll wake you up.”

That seemed to satisfy him.

I spent my night in his arms, lost in the feel of his heart beating in my abdomen as I tried to get my mind wrapped around the new connection we shared.

We headed out before the sun rose. I grudgingly let Tuslan carry me, and beasts, he moved fast.

After we stopped for lunch, I felt exhaustion starting to take hold through our connection, and told him I wanted to walk.

He put me down, reluctantly, and we hiked until I couldn’t see any more.

I felt bad when he went hunting for us, but he reminded me that I was the only reason he wasn’t savage—and then gave me the rest of his energy, and crashed.

I sat beside him while he snored, and I stared out at the thickly-forested mountains surrounding us.

It hadn’t gotten too much harder to breathe yet, but Tuslan warned me it would get worse as we went higher. He thought we had two days left of hiking if we went at his pace—which was significantly faster than mine. Considering we were

splitting between his and mine, I figured we'd be walking another three days or so.

It was a long few hours, without much light, but sitting and laying beside Tuslan, it wasn't a huge deal. I stretched my magic, trying to figure out if it had changed any during the transition. I also tried to catch myself on fire like I had that first day on the mountain, but I failed. If the power had been mine, I couldn't feel it within me.

Tuslan slept four hours or so before he woke himself up. I'd have let him sleep longer—he was obviously lying about only needing that much sleep—but he probably knew that I didn't intend on waking him up.

We walked in silence for a bit while he woke up, and after he found us some more food, he scooped me up and hauled me up the mountain at super-speed for many, many hours.

There wasn't a trail or anything, so we were just picking our way up the mountain. It wasn't ideal, but what about our lives was?

Three days later, Tuslan slowed in the middle of the afternoon.

“What is it?” I looked around us.

“I smell gold,” he said.

Smell?

“You can smell gold?”

“Yup.”

Well, I guess that would explain how he found the cave he'd made into his hoard and its insane amount of gold veining in the walls.

“Its scent is pretty subtle, and you can't smell it until you're close,” he explained. “When we're mated, you'll learn to smell it too.”

That was pretty weird, but at least us mating was a “when” and not an “if” now.

“Can you see it?” I asked him.

“Not yet. But my sight isn't as advanced as the rest of my senses.”

Ah.

Right.

He wasn't super in *every* way, just *most* ways.

He continued walking, heading nearly straight up. If I'd been walking it, I would've needed some kind of climbing tools to help me on the steep, rocky cliffs. But Tuslan had better control of his body than I had of mine—even while he was carrying me.

“There it is,” he said, less than a minute later.

I squinted up at the mountain above us.

“You’ll see it in a minute.”

He was right; it would be really damn nice to have senses as good as his. To be less fragile, stronger, faster... Wow, I’d be the full package.

A few minutes later, I saw a flash of gold above us. It grew bigger, and brighter, until Tuslan was holding me to him with one arm, scaling some kind of golden cliff with the other.

“Beasts,” I squeezed my eyes shut before my heart could clench in terror at the sight of just how far we were from the ground. I liked flying and enjoyed adrenaline, but something about holding on to my almost-mate that far above the rest of the world was absolutely petrifying.

Tuslan swung his legs up over the ledge at the top of the wall, and I gasped as we slid over the edge. My heart pounded in my chest as he landed beneath me—on something flat, it felt like.

I slowly peeked my eyes open, and found Tuslan grinning up at me. “You didn’t really think I was going to fall.”

“Nope,” I lied.

His grin widened. “Such a bad liar.”

I rolled my eyes. “There are better qualities to have than *good liar*.”

“And you have all of them,” he agreed, lifting his mouth to mine.

I finally looked to either side of me, easing my body up off Tuslan's, and my forehead wrinkled when I saw where we were.

It looked like some kind of massive golden pavilion. Four thick, elegant pillars held a solid gold canopy up over our heads, and the canopy cut upward in a shape that I knew had to resemble the top point of the mountain. It was jagged, but smooth at the same time, as if someone had poured liquid gold over the top of it and then removed the cliffs within.

Carvings trailed up the four columns, but I couldn't make them out from where we were, near the edge of the pavilion.

My gaze swept the furniture scattered around the open space. Simple golden chairs, tables, and even couches—though they didn't look like comfortable ones—filled the space. My eyes caught on what looked like a railing off to one side.

Was that a staircase?

I stepped toward it, but Tuslan caught my hand. "Easy, Leviathan. The magic here is insanely strong and still messing with my senses, so I don't know if anyone else is here. And I'm the only thing keeping you warm."

"Easy, Leviathan," I mimicked him, earning a dangerous grin. "I do have a jacket, though it's admittedly not nearly as warm as you are. But as I told you, I don't have a death wish."

"If I don't explain myself, you'll assume I'm telling you you're not strong enough. And since that's not the case..." His grin grew. "Beasts, I'm glad we made it."

“Doubted it, huh?” I asked, lacing my fingers through his and tugging him toward one of the columns. If someone was living there, I’d rather they hear us moving around and come out to greet us. I didn’t particularly want to walk down those stairs and into some kind of attack.

“No.” He wasn’t lying. I could feel it in his emotions—beasts, I was starting to love that connection. “I’m just looking forward to sleeping with a roof over our heads so I don’t have to worry about you so much.”

“Aww. Leviathan, you’re going to make me cry,” I drawled.

His fingers brushed my side, tickling me, and I laughed as I tried to dodge him. He swept me up into his arms and planted a kiss on my mouth. My laughter died down as his tongue swept mine, and though neither of us was incredibly clean or fresh, we didn’t care.

Our bodies were together, and our mouths were together, and our souls were together.

I got lost in his mouth, hands, and heartbeat as we kissed for the sole purpose of *connecting*.

“Come on,” I breathed when I finally pulled away, flashing him a smile. My lips were a little swollen, but he didn’t seem inclined to heal that away.

“What are we doing?”

“Checking out the carvings. They look fancy.” I pulled him up to the nearest pillar, and my eyes swept the gold from top to bottom. It was insanely tall, and intricate shapes and letters curved up the entirety of it. “Can you read the words?” I asked

him, studying the odd-shaped letters before focusing on the rest of the pillar.

My eyes trailed over images of people, wolves, dragons... even leviathans. They seemed to be telling a story as we moved from one layer to another, but it seemed to be progressing downward, and I couldn't see the top.

"This is a lost language." Tuslan said, stepping around the column with me as he took it all in too. "I think it's the shifter origin story. You read the book by Liame Portes?"

"Yeah. The brilliant moron," I murmured absentmindedly, still circling the gold pillar. "I think you're right. There's more in here, though. Some kind of flying person-beast..." I gestured to the winged person carved into the column repeatedly.

"Humans called them angels, before they migrated here," Tuslan explained. "She's holding a rock—it's probably the diamonte Portes refers to."

"The book said it could talk."

"Portes probably didn't want to mention an angel. They're sacred to humans."

"Well, the magic here definitely feels old and sacred," I agreed. "What kind of a beast is an angel?"

"They come from the worlds above, but nothing really explains their power. They're people with wings, and can do miraculous things."

My eyes met the bottom of the pillar and I glanced to my right. “Do you think the story continues over there?”

“Yes.”

We headed over, but immediately realized the problem.

“It starts at the top,” I said, frustrated as I tried to figure out what may have happened in the gap of column we couldn’t see.

“There may be a ladder down the stairs.”

Dammit, I didn’t want to go down the stairs. What if someone attacked us?

Then again, Tuslan was about as scary as it got. Or he should’ve been. According to the legends. I’d never really been all that scared of him.

“You’ll go down first?” I asked him, grimacing.

He eyed me. “Since when are you afraid of seeing new things?”

“Since we’re on top of a mountain where you can’t shift and we’re both lying about not being exhausted enough to drop on our faces and sleep for a week,” I retorted.

“There might be a bookshelf down there. And a bed.” He paused, waiting for my reaction. “And a bathtub.”

Bathtub?

Beasts, the idea of a hot bath made me want to moan. It sounded so damn good.

“You had me at bath.” I tugged him toward the stairs, and he stepped in front of me as we approached.

“Can I wrap you in my fire so I’m ready if I need to kill anything?” he asked. “I don’t want you to freeze that cute little ass off.”

“Nothing about this ass is little, but yes. You may.”

His flames engulfed me, and I halted where I was for a minute, my eyes slamming shut as the overwhelming peace of it filled me. Everything was silent, and calm, and—

“Blue?” he pressed.

“Sorry. High on phoenix fire,” I mumbled, catching up to him. We headed down the stairs slowly. “The effect of your fire probably means the flames didn’t belong to me, though, right?”

“I didn’t know you were thinking about that,” he murmured, moving slowly down the stairs. All I saw was darkness in whatever was beneath us—AKA nothing—so I didn’t know what he was seeing, but a quick glance at his emotions told me he was just being cautious.

“Of course I’ve been thinking about that. You basically insinuated that I’m becoming a—”

“Let’s be quiet for a minute, Blue.” He interrupted me, but the words were gentle, not cruel.

Right.

We were descending into a black hole for all we knew.

I shut up.

The darkness grew as we continued moving down the staircase in the dark. When my visibility grew worse, the flames around me darkened too, barely lighting anything up at all. I could only just barely see the steps in front of me, so I grabbed Tuslan's arm and held on tight as I followed behind him. He went at my pace, still checking for threats, I assumed.

I didn't realize we'd reached the end of the staircase when he stopped, so my nose met his back. I grunted, and his flames grew slightly brighter as they healed my non-injury before dimming again. Despite their lack of brightness, they still evened out my emotions and calmed me better than any tea or hot bath ever had.

A girl with a constant ball of stress in her stomach could definitely get used to that.

"We're in a large room," Tuslan murmured, so softly I could barely hear. "It resembles a living area, with rugs, couches, and a great number of bookshelves. It looks and smells like it's been vacant for a long time, but we'll check out the rest of the place in the darkness before I turn on the lights."



11

My mind moved as we continued checking out the rest of the golden pavilion's basement.

If Tuslan saw light switches, that meant there was a electricity there—which was odd, considering the mountain had been locked by a barrier for centuries, according to Tuslan and Liame Portes.

“This is the last room,” Tuslan said, speaking at a normal level. The flames around me vanished, and he caught my hand and pulled me a bit further.

Lights flickered on above our heads, and my eyes squinted at the sudden brightness after wandering around in the dark for so long.

The floors and walls were gold, but the decorations in the bedroom were all done in bright, vibrant colors that breathed life into it. Had the furniture been gold too, it would've made the place feel like a crypt, but with the colorful rugs and blankets and chairs, it looked happy and comfortable. Someone had clearly spent a lot of time and money making the mountain into a place worthy of living in—but who?

“It's empty?” I asked him.

“Yes. Smells like it’s been empty for a few years, but there’s no dust or anything. Can you feel the magic here?”

I frowned. Surrounded by his flames, I’d practically been drugged to everything.

I walked to the edge of the room and put a hand on the wall. If barrier magic was infused in it, I’d feel it in a physical location, not just in the air.

The moment my skin met the wall, I inhaled sharply.

The structure came to life around me. Shimmering magic thrummed and moved over every inch of it, all of it ancient and breathtakingly-strong. It wove through the walls, over the furniture, within the rugs.

I followed the wall through the living space. The magic continued to roll and move over everything in sight as we passed a massive bathroom, an indoor pool, and some kind of painting studio.

I stopped when we reached the gigantic room with a staircase at the center of it. It did look like a living area—there were heaps of couches, blankets, rugs... but it wasn’t a living room.

Not really.

Because lining every bit of wall space, there were books.

They were practically the only thing in the whole structure that didn’t thrum with barrier magic.

“Why don’t the books have magic?” I wondered aloud.

Tuslan didn’t answer, seeming to realize that I was talking to myself. If he knew I did that and still liked me, it must’ve been true love.

I lifted my hand away from the wall, and watched the magic ripple.

“No,” I breathed.

My palm smacked the wall again, and a slapping noise met my ears.

“How? That’s not possible. It shouldn’t be possible.”

“What?” Tuslan asked, curiosity in his voice. Though he knew me, and seemed to understand my magic as well as anyone, it wasn’t the same as possessing it and physically seeing it yourself.

“The walls are made of barrier magic. The furniture too. Everything here, except the books, were literally *created* with barrier magic, Tuslan. Whoever made this has the same power as me—but like a million times stronger. This is permanent. It’s not draining energy, or relying on anything or anyone. Except maybe... Tendira itself? I don’t know. But this is unreal. With this much barrier magic, you could do *anything*.”

“Then who does it belong to?” he mused.

“I have no idea. There was an angel on the pillar—could this be some kind of ultra-powered human magic?”

“I don’t know.”

“But this stuff... the style isn’t old-fashioned.” I looked around the room, at the fluffy blankets and the smooth fabric.

Tuslan’s gaze swept the room. “It’s not outdated. Whoever lived here must’ve been to the human land or traded with the humans less than five or six years ago.”

“Maybe he or she traveled back there?” I suggested.

“This place has been empty for years, Blue. The air is magical, but stale. It hasn’t seen life in a long time.” Tuslan’s eyes met mine. “The owner is female. I saw dozens of bath products on the tub, and though plenty of men like nice bath products, none of us own more than two or three bottles of shampoo. There were eight.”

Something about that felt right. A woman living there, in this magical house. Alone?

“Was there men’s shampoo too?” I asked him.

He shrugged.

Tuslan was observant, but not *that* observant.

“Come on.” I tugged him toward the large bathroom we’d passed, and he walked at my side.

His flames wrapped around me again as I released his hand. Sitting on the edge of the massive tub, I grabbed bottles of bath

products. I checked the scents—all floral—and whooped when I found one that didn't match.

Pine.

“It wasn't just a woman living here. A man, and a woman. Mates, probably. Otherwise, if she's got barrier magic, there's no way she would've lived long enough to build all of this stuff.” I gestured to the tub.

“Is the shampoo made of magic?” Tuslan checked.

“Nope. Smells good though.” I sniffed at the pine soap and handed it to Tuslan. He smelled it too, and nodded before handing it back. “What kind of soap do you use?” I asked him, standing up and taking his hand so he could release the drug-like flames from around me.

“It's a combination of scents made by an artisan in the pack. It took a lot of years to find one that didn't annoy my nose by layering over my scent improperly.”

Wow. I hadn't considered that aspect of having strong senses. “Does mine annoy your nose?”

His lips lifted. “No. The one you used to use didn't sit perfectly with me, but your scent is memorable enough that it wasn't challenging to find soap that worked well with it.”

“So you went to some kind of... soap merchant... and sniffed around until you found a smell that you thought would go well with my scent?” I checked, eyeing him. I wasn't suspicious; I was flattered.

“Yes.” He didn’t bat an eye.

“How did that conversation go?”

“The shifter was used to working with me. She’s the best, and she knows it.” He shrugged

I wasn’t intimidated by the shifter woman. Tuslan had obviously known her longer than he’d known me; if he was interested in her, he would’ve acted on it.

But then again, he did have a fan club...

“What’s her name?” I asked.

He flashed me a smirk. “Jealous, Blue?”

“Not yet.”

He chuckled, his palm meeting the side of my face gently. “You have no need to fear.”

“It’ll take me a while to get used to that,” I admitted.

“Me too.”

I felt a trembling in the building’s magic, and frowned.

The trembling grew to a shaking, and then the magic was shuddering so badly I was afraid the damned mountain would break.

I shot to my feet, surging toward the thickest magic: the stuff in the walls. My palms met them as I tried to figure out what was going wrong with the magic, but the moment my power collided with it, a woman's face materialized within the barrier.

I tried to rip my hands away, but the magic was much stronger than mine, and effectively trapped me.

The woman's face came into focus, and then I saw her hair, and body. She was shaped like me—soft and human—but her face was twisted in pain. As the colors set in, I saw that her eyes were bloodshot and the skin around them was puffy, like she'd been crying.

“The Shifter Queen,” she murmured.

“Who are you?”

“The first Queen.” Her face contorted, and my stomach clenched. I felt hands on my shoulders and knew they belonged to Tuslan, but couldn't hear him saying anything, if he was speaking.

“Listen to me. The Tidal Pack has taken my mate and I hostage. They're trying to kill you, but I see they've failed. You need to find me, and rescue me, without falling into their hands.”

“Where are they holding you? How do I find you?” I demanded. “They already killed me. My mate resurrected me, but all of the shifters are savage now. How do I fix this?”

Her face contorted again, and blood leaked out of her nose. Her eyes started to roll back into her head, and the shape of her

grew fuzzy, but she shook herself and it cleared back up for the most part.

“Find a black diamonte. Tap into its soul, and let it teach you to connect to Tendira’s magic. The bigger the gem, the easier it is to tap into it.” She paused, and everything went blurry again. When she came back into focus, her nose was bleeding profusely. “Reconnect all the shifters to Tendira, but don’t tie them to you—I should never have done that. Tie them to my mountain. Anchor them to the only thing that can truly never die. The chain of Queens broke when you lost your life; you were the last Human Queen.”

“Okay, I have a million other questions, but where are—” the magic vanished, and the tower grew steady, “you,” I whispered.

“Mesa,” Tuslan’s snarl was so fierce it had me spinning around, looking for a threat.

“What? What happened?”

“You were trapped to a fucking wall, unresponsive. What was that? What happened?” His hand swept beneath my nose, and I looked down at the blood on his finger. “Why are you bleeding?”

“I don’t know about the blood, but the owner of this place somehow reached out to me through the barrier magic. She was talking to me. The Tidals have her—that’s probably how they screwed with the desedra, and—it doesn’t matter. They have her. She told me how to fix the savage wolves, but she’s trapped. And I don’t know how to find her, or how she contacted me, but her magic is so, so strong. And—”

“Breathe, Blue,” he commanded.

Both of his hands cupped my face.

“You’re telling me to breathe? You’re the one who was just freaking out. If one of us needs to breathe, it’s—”

He inhaled deeply, and I cut myself off to follow his lead, taking a deep breath in and then slowly releasing it. We repeated it three times before my mind finally stopped spinning so damn fast.

“What did the Queen say about fixing the savage packs?” Tuslan prodded.

“Something insane.” My face wrinkled as I frowned. “She told me to find a black diamonte and tap into its soul. She thinks it’ll teach me to access Tendira’s magic somehow. From there, I’m supposed to connect all of the shifters to this mountain, somehow.”

He nodded. “Okay. And she didn’t try to hurt you, or access your magic?”

“No. She was in pain. Horrible pain. I think they’re torturing her,” I admitted.

“Alright; we can work with this. How hard can it be to tap into a gemstone’s soul?”



12

My eyes watered.

“You’ve got to blink, woman.” A ball of fire crashed into me and warmed me down to my damned soul. My eyes blinked like crazy, the image of the ring in front of me disappearing and reappearing as my poor eyes tried to fix themselves.

“I don’t know what I’m doing wrong,” I complained, dropping my ring back to the carpet. “This is the biggest diamonte you have?”

“The only other one I have is shaped into a ring. Overall, its size is larger, but it’s in my lair. It hasn’t sharpened or smoothed, so I don’t know whether or not whatever shaped it into a ring removed its soul,” he explained, from across the room.

He stood in front of the stove, barefoot and just as shirtless as always. He’d gone out to get food after lighting a fire to keep me warm, while I sat down and tried to figure out how to tap into the rock’s soul.

Excuse me, the *gemstone’s* soul.

Tuslan had corrected me about that twice already.

We'd assumed it would be simple to break into the soul, but so far, I couldn't even feel the damn thing.

"It took you some time to find my emotions within our bond," he reminded me. "It always takes time to learn new magic."

He shook some kind of seasoning on the meat. I didn't even know why he was cooking the meat in the pan, since he had mastered cooking meat without a pan, but sometimes it was just better not to question the Alpha.

"Really? How long did it take you to learn how to fly after you shifted into your dragon form?"

"About eight seconds. That was life or death, though."

"So if something was trying to stab me, I'd be able to tap into the diamante's soul?" I drawled.

He didn't answer right away—because we both knew the answer.

"You're still young, which makes you new to magic as a whole, Mesa. Be patient with yourself," he finally said.

I set the ring down on the rug and got up, walking over to the stove. My head hurt after so much time attempting to focus on the gem, and I had absolutely nothing to show for it.

"What are you doing?" I asked, leaning my ass up against the counter as I watched him flip cubes of meat.

“Making a stew,” he said, without pause. “I haven’t had much time to learn how to make human food since we’ve met, but Alyx was teaching me the basics whenever we had a few minutes.”

I blinked at him. “You’re ridiculous,” I finally said, turning my head to look out at the living room. My head tilted backward.

“Thank you?” His words were a question.

“That wasn’t an insult. I just mean it’s ridiculous how you manage to find a way to do everything, and you always do it perfectly. Like, do you ever suck at things? Anything?” I paused. “Okay, now it’s a legitimate question. In your entire life, what have you ever been terrible at?”

There was a long moment of silence while he turned to the stove and filled a pot with water, setting it on the back burner. He turned it on without a problem, as if he’d been doing it his whole life.

Then again, it wasn’t exactly hard to turn on the stove.

“My mother never approved of anything I did,” he admitted. “I worked hard to do everything perfectly. I learned how to learn quickly, how not to waste time. I never did manage to make her happy, though. I was terrible at that.”

I suddenly felt like shit for asking him. “Beasts, Red. She sounds like a bitch.”

His lips curved upward sadly. “She was.” He stirred the meat in the pan, focusing on what he was doing. “My Alpha, when I was a Lead in Lava, was much worse. And when you spend

enough time around perfectionists, you learn to be careful not to fuck up. People like that find something wrong with even the most perfect of actions. Screw up, and you give them ammunition.”

“I’ve known a few people like that,” I admitted.

“Cina?” His eyes met mine briefly.

“Yup.”

“I picked that up when you were explaining about her rules. The thought of someone treating you that way makes me feel... violent.”

“Well the thought of your mom and Alpha treating you that way makes me feel violent, too. And I’m not usually a violent person, so I think that makes the feeling normal.”

The soft smile he gave me made my heart feel happy, like nothing else really could.

He focused back on his food, adding a few plants that I hadn’t noticed on the counter before. He must’ve scavenged them off the mountain, but I figured he’d lived in Lava territory long enough to know what was edible and what wasn’t. “I’m terrible at knitting,” he told me. “I tried once, when I got bored after everything stabilized with the Blood Pack. I was supposed to make a square, but the shape turned out to be some kind of lump when I was done.”

I grinned.

He continued, “I spent six months trying obsessively to learn, reading books about it and talking to experts, but for the life of me, I couldn’t ever make anything stitched evenly. I finally burned everything I’d ever made and gave up entirely after I spent two weeks on a blanket only to end up with a look of pity from Reta.”

I snorted. “Beasts, who’d have thought.”

“I do still have a collection of nice yarns I traded the humans for when I was in that phase. It got shoved to the back of my hoard.”

I laughed. “I saw that! I wondered why Yarn Mountain qualified for the treasure room.”

His lips quirked upward. “Not everything there is treasure, necessarily. Dragons collect things that mean something to us. Pretty things, sure, and expensive, often. But it’s not the price tag that matters, it’s the meaning.”

“What’s the meaning to the jewelry, then?” I countered, gesturing to the slim necklace against my collarbone. “You have more than you can ever wear.”

“It takes a lot of focus, training, and expertise to make a beautiful piece of jewelry.” He lifted his knuckles to my collarbone, brushing them slowly over the chain around my neck. “Every chain-link must be connected. Every piece of metal softened and moved. Every jewel carefully secured. All gemstones have some amount of fire and spirit to them, but the time and energy spent on a piece of jewelry is what makes it treasure. It’s not just a chain around your neck; it’s the soul of a diamante, and the time of a practiced craftsman. You wear days of someone’s life around your neck, and it’s beautiful.”

The words touched me. “That’s interesting to think about.”

His knuckles brushed my lips. “Of course, it’s nothing compared to the treasure and meaning held within you, an actual living creature. But dragons who hoard people are typically monsters without consciences, because life wasn’t meant to be trapped.”

“You’ve sure got a way with words, Red,” I remarked.

He lifted an eyebrow. “That’s a compliment I’ve never received before.”

“It wasn’t a compliment,” I teased.

“Yes, it was.” His knuckles dragged over my lalidro before he turned back to the food on the stove. “And thank you. I’ve never let someone in this much before. It feels... freeing.”

“Yeah, it does.”

He cooked for a few minutes, and I reflected on everything he’d said. There was a lot to Tuslan that I still hadn’t learned. I knew he probably had thousands of secrets that he wasn’t keeping from me intentionally—secrets that had just built up over time. And I looked forward to uncovering them, for hopefully the next many, many years.

Maybe even an eternity.

“Have you ever felt any kind of a soul inside of a diamonte?” I asked him.

“No. This one sharpens just at my touch, though. It’s not a fan of me.”

“Really? Show me.”

“Just a minute...” he dumped a couple things into the pot, setting the dirty dishes in the sink and then stirring everything. When it was good and stirred, he set the large spoon down and turned toward me. “Okay, feel it now?”

I ran my fingers over the thin stone. It was odd how skinny it was, and that it came in such a strange shape. Then again, who could tell a rock with a soul how to bend itself?

I held it out to Tuslan, and he carefully picked it up. He rubbed his fingers around it, and then handed it back. My thumb moved over it, and my eyebrows shot upward. I could feel ridges running along the portion he’d touched. They weren’t super sharp, but he’d only held it for a second.

“Beasts, it really *doesn’t* like you.”

He gave me a lazy grin. “Probably because I could snap it between my fingers without any effort.”

“Probably.” He stirred his soup again, and his other hand landed on my thigh. “Does that give you any insight into the diamonte’s soul?”

“Nope. I didn’t feel a thing when it sharpened. It’s pretty small, though, and the Queen said the size determines how easy it is.”

He nodded. “The one in the carving was massive. Bigger than her fist. I wonder if she still has it.”

I shrugged. “We could look for it. But if she does, it’s probably hidden.”

“I can search for it after we eat, while you try to figure out the gemstone again.”

My face twisted. I really didn’t want to try to figure out the gemstone again. Ever.

“We could take a break first,” he remarked, his fingers moving up my thigh a little further.

“Could we?” I countered.

His lips parted in a smirk. “Yes.” His fingers moved higher. “If you want.”

“You’d have to work pretty hard to help me focus. My brain feels like mush right now.” I gestured to my head, my cheeks flushing a bit as my body started to heat.

“You won’t need your brain for what I’m imagining.”

His thumb brushed up against the crease in my thigh, and my body clenched in anticipation.

He withdrew his hand, though, turning back to the stove. The curve of his lips told me he knew exactly what he was doing to me.

“You’re a tease,” I remarked.

“You’re unbelievably seductive. What other choice do I have but to tease you into wanting me?”

“It’s not a bad thing. I like the way you tease me.” I grabbed his hand, dragging it back up my thigh. “Keep teasing me.”

His knuckles brushed the front of me, and my body tensed again before he pulled away once more. This time, he wore a grin. “Your desire smells incredible.”

“Everything about me is incredible.” I feigned fluffing my hair, since it was tied up in a days-old, sweat-crusting bun.

“That may be the truest thing you’ve ever said.” His fingers brushed my chest as he reached past me for the spices sitting on the counter, and they brushed my abdomen as he pulled them back over to the stove.

“How long does this soup need to simmer?” I checked.

“I don’t know. Alyx never got to that part.”

“Well, I think it’s ready,” I decided.

He flashed me a smirk. “Do you?”

“Yes. And we both know I’m the chef here, so let’s eat.”



13

We ate quickly, but neither of us moved to get up. The soup was surprisingly delicious, but I shouldn't have been surprised—Tuslan didn't do things halfway, after all.

His feet brushed mine under the table as he told me everything he'd put in the food. It wasn't much, but I hadn't heard of any of the herbs he'd used.

“Have you missed the food from Lava since you left?” I asked, purposefully brushing my legs against his again.

“In some ways. But food comes with memories, and there's nothing I want to remember about my time here.” His legs brushed mine again, and I knew he was doing it just as much on purpose as I was.

“You know what food comes with the most memories for me?” I asked.

He tilted his head to the side, studying me.

Rounds came to mind, but I didn't want to feel sad about my friends. They were strong fighters; they'd be back in Blood Territory, and just fine.

“Sandwiches.”

His lips tilted upward.

“I still can’t wrap my mind around you refusing to let me eat something Paik had taken a bite out of,” I continued.

“You’re mine,” he said, his voice silky. “What’s so hard to understand about that?”

“All of it, really,” I lied, sliding forward on my chair as I dragged my foot up his leg, settling it up against his inner thigh. “What about me do you think belongs to you?”

“Everything.”

I pressed my toes lightly into his thigh, and his eyes darkened.

“Like?”

“Your mouth, for one. From now on, the only person you’ll be tasting is me.”

“That’s a bummer,” I drawled, pressing my toes into his thigh again.

His body tensed for me.

Two could play the teasing game.

I slid my foot up a little higher. Not high enough to hit his erection, yet.

“What else?” I prodded.

“Your eyes. In a crowd of people, I’ll always find them—and they’ll always find me.”

I pressed my toes into his thigh again, and bit back a smile when his muscles tensed, squishing my foot between his legs. “You’re pretty possessive, huh?”

“You’ve only seen the start of it.” He didn’t bat an eye at the words.

I waited, and he knew what I was waiting for. Though I expected him to come out and say, “your body belongs to me,” he didn’t.

“Your passion is mine. Your pleasure. Your moans of desire, and your cries of bliss. Every emotion you feel in the fire of passion, every shred of longing and every urge for more that you feel—it’s all mine.”

“Mmhmm.” I nodded slowly, moving my toes just the tiniest bit closer to the erection that was dying for my attention.

“Sometimes I’ll tell you your body is mine—sometimes I’ll be possessive of the way you look, the smiles you share, the time you give. But ultimately, do you know what those feelings come from, Blue?”

“No.”

He waited, that time, and his fingers stroked slowly up my calf.

“What do they come from?” I asked.

“Your possession of everything I am. You want me in a shirt? I’ll be clothed. You want me to pleasure you with my mouth, under water and in an ice-cold lake? I’ll fly you there myself. You want me to never look at another woman, to read you a steamy romance, to swear never to eat meat again—I’ll do it. Because I’m yours, in every way you’re mine. And probably more, too.”

If I wasn’t turned on before, I was then.

“Is that so?” I pushed my foot up further, and his fingers brushed the underside of my knee as my foot brushed over his erection.

“Especially when you do that.”

He caught my foot, dragging it over the length of him a few times before he stood up, stepping around his chair and over to mine.

Before I knew what was happening, he’d plucked me out of my chair and was hauling me off toward the bedroom.

“What do you think you’re doing?” I sassed him, a bit out of breath as his hand brushed my core again.

“Taking my almost-mate to bed.”

“In someone else’s bed?”

“It hasn’t been used in years. You can put a barrier over it if you’re worried about it being dirty.” He dropped me to the mattress, and his body was pressing into mine almost immediately. He moved his hips over mine, grinding his erection against me, and my legs wrapped around his hips.

Whatever worry I’d had about it being dirty had gone out the window the moment I felt his body against mine.

He tsked his tongue, catching my legs and prying them apart. “I want to taste you, Mesa. I want you to cry out in pleasure before our bodies ever meet. You don’t wear many of my marks, and we need to fix that long before I’m inside you.”

Thrill raced through me. “You want to have sex?”

Beasts, finally.

“I want to *make love*.” He leaned back, pulling me up to a sitting position, and hooked his fingers in the bottom hem of my bandeau. “Assuming you’re still interested.”

“Yes. *Beasts*, yes.”

“Good.” He dragged my bandeau up over my head and tossed it to the floor, his eyes growing dark as my breasts fell free.

His palm met my abdomen as he lowered me back to the mattress. I let out a breath of air, but before it left me completely, his mouth was on mine.

“You’re wearing too many clothes,” I murmured.

“I’m not getting naked until you’ve orgasmed at least twice,” he growled back against my lips.

I lost myself to the delicious battle of his mouth and mine, my limbs growing heavier and my body growing more ready for what I knew was coming. Anticipation curled my lower belly as his fingers wrapped around the back of my upper thigh, lifting my leg further up his hip. My pants were thin enough not to hide a damn thing.

My toes brushed the soft fabric of *his* pants, and I pulled away for the smallest second, breathing fast. “Take your pants off. I want to see you naked while you’re licking me.”

The words earned me that soft, nearly-inaudible rumbly growl I loved.

He pulled away long enough to strip. My fingers wrapped around his erection, and beasts, I loved the feel of him.

He dragged himself out of my grasp, settling his pelvis against mine, and another round of hot thrill raced through me at the contact.

I lifted one of my legs to wrap around his waist, trying to line him up with me as our lips met again. My hands found his ass, and he growled at me. “Mesa. Let me take my time with you.” He caught my wrists and pinned them to the mattress above my head with one of his hands.

“I hate rules,” I growled back, though mine was admittedly less impressive than his—and my throat hurt after I made the sound.

“Give me one, then.”

“An orgasm?” Beasts, I liked the sound of that.

His rough laugh told me he didn't like it as much as I did. “A rule. Neither of us like them, so you can give me one every time I give you one.”

Ooh.

Okay.

“Your rule was me getting off before we have sex. Mine was you, naked. Yours is...”

“No trying to make me break my rule.”

“Right. Stupid rule, but whatever.”

Another laugh escaped him, and his lips trailed kisses and nibbles down my neck.

“Well, if you're not going to let me touch you, then you're not allowed to touch me. No hands; that's my rule.”

I tilted my head down so our eyes could meet, one of his hands wrapped around my tit and the other still holding my hands above my head.

His eyes narrowed. “No.”

“Then I get to feel you up as much as I want,” I shot back.

He growled at me, and let out a huff of air as he finally, slowly, moved his hands to sit on either side of my waist. “No extra rules.” His lips brushed my nipple as he spoke, and my body clenched.

“Fine. After you get me off, all the rules are gone too,” I added.

“Deal.” He flicked his tongue over my nipple, and my body arched up to his. A rough chuckle escaped him, and his muscles tensed as he held himself back. He probably would’ve slipped his hands between my thighs, and...

Why did I make that rule?”

His tongue flicked my nipple, and I arched again.

“If I can’t touch you, I can’t get you off with my hands, too,” he said, his lips tickling my nipple again.

“Guess you’d better submit to me and cancel your rules, then,” I breathed.

His eyes flashed, and I saw the challenge in them. “You want me to submit?” Our gazes remained locked as he lowered his lips back to my nipple, and wrapped them around me. His teeth grazed me, and I fought like hell to stop myself from bucking beneath him because it felt so damn good.

“Just call me Alpha, and I’ll know you’re putting me in charge,” I said, my breathing still shallow.

“I’ll keep the option in mind,” he murmured, teeth scraping my nipple again.

I couldn't help the moan that escaped me, and he wedged his leg up against my core. I still had on pants, unfortunately, but I was pretty sure he'd remedy that soon.

He made love to that nipple with his mouth, leaving me panting and moaning before he even made it to the second one. By the time he finished that one, I was so damn close to an orgasm that it literally hurt.

His knee brushed my core, and I cried out.

"Want more?" his nose brushed my oversensitive nipple. "I could get you off, if you call *me* Alpha."

"I'm stronger than that," I moaned, rubbing my pelvis against his thigh.

The motion brushed my knee against his erection, and he swore as he trapped it in his hands.

My eyes flicked to his hands, and then back to his eyes. He swore again, letting go.

His nose met the center of my chest, and he slowly dragged his tongue down my middle. My body clenched as he swiveled around the middle circle of my lalidro, wrapping closely around my belly button.

"I can't take your pants off unless you submit," he said, running his tongue just beneath the waistband of my pants.

"You can't take my pants off unless *you* submit."

Honestly, I was happy submitting to him. I really didn't care all that much.

But our first real time together, we needed lines to be drawn. He needed to know that I wasn't always going to give in to his every whim, because he would steamroll me if I let him. And then I'd lose myself, which I wasn't okay with.

And I also needed to know that he would submit to me. He'd told me he loved me, and he'd done a hell of a lot to show it, but if an Alpha submitted... well, then there wasn't a damn question that he was mine as much as I was his.

"Haven't I submitted before?" Tuslan murmured, dragging his tongue back up to my tits. My body ached for release, then, but I wasn't on the edge anymore.

I knew that would only make it better eventually, though.

"I don't know. Can't exactly think straight right now."

"But you won't expect me to be the only one submitting, when we're in bed." He positioned himself further up my body, his lips finding my nipples again.

"Of course not. I just want to see if you can." I bit back a curse when he didn't wrap his lips back around my nipple.

"Alright, Alpha. Where do you want me?" His dark eyes burned into mine, waiting.

"Take my pants off, and stop holding back."

His lips curved in a smirk. “Sounds like we want the same thing.” His tongue flicked my nipple again before he moved back down me. His fingers hooked in the waist of my pants and tugged downward, pulling them off but leaving my panties on. They were cheeky gold things, nothing fancy, but not hideous, either.

My fingers dug into his hair as he lowered his face to my center, inhaling deeply. A groan escaped him, and he brushed his nose over my core before his tongue flicked the fabric covering me. I arched into him, and his hands caught the upper insides of my thighs. He parted them, and his thumbs brushed my center as he held my legs apart.

“I want to burn these so fucking badly. To smell my fire on your most intimate parts, to—”

“Then do it, Tuslan. Beasts, just—ohhh.” His flamed devoured the fabric covering me, kissing my skin with that insanely powerful drug that was my almost-mate. He inhaled again, and there was no pause—he devoured me.

His finger slipped inside me, and his tongue worked my center, and I lost it. I cried out as I shattered, and he adjusted himself against my leg.

“Don’t finish yet,” I panted. “I want you to finish inside me.”

He growled into my core. “You’re a torturous Alpha, Leviathan.”

“You love torture.”

His barked laugh made me laugh too.

“I’ve got to get you ready for me,” he said, lips still kissing my center. His finger slid out, and two replaced it.

My body had to stretch to fit him, but beasts, I liked the feeling.

He worked his fingers in and out while he slowly feasted on me. When he added a third finger, I took an unsteady breath in and he paused. “You like that?”

“Beasts, yes.”

The growl I got in response was purely carnal, and I loved it. He started picking up the pace with his tongue, and my breathing grew uneven again. “I’ll have to numb you with my flames so it doesn’t hurt, the first time,” he growled into me.

“No you won’t. I want to feel every bit of you—good and bad.”

“I refuse to hurt you.” His fingers tightened on my thighs, and I loved the way he parted my legs further, giving himself better access.

“I’m not letting you in if you use your flames.”

He snarled into my crotch. “Mesa.”

“Burn me. You can touch the burn when we do it if it’s uncomfortable at all, and you’ll know it feels good for me.” I was panting again. “Anywhere you want.”

His free hand reached up for my breast and wrapped around it, and his flames flicked on. The pure passion coming from the fire, relaxing and tensing me at the same time, undid me.

I cried out as the orgasm rolled through me, my body clenching and unclenching around his fingers.

His tongue slowed, letting me feel the effects of the orgasm before he climbed back up me, his cock aligning with my core.

My eyes closed and my face contorted as pure pleasure rolled through me. His fingers were on the mark—on my breast—and the feel of his hot erection against my entrance only pushed me more.

“You tell me to stop if it hurts,” he growled down at me.

“Just go slow and it’ll be fine. I’m soaked,” I said, dazed.

“You are.” The satisfaction in his eyes was all male. “And I’m not going to last long.”

I probably wouldn’t either, given that he was huge, and I was human. “I’ll tell you when you can finish,” I breathed.

His dark eyes bore into me. “Cruel, sexy woman.”

“Mmhmm.” I wrapped my legs around his waist, tilting myself upward. He pressed into me, just slightly, and we both groaned at the first feel of his tip sliding into me.

“Holy fuck, woman.” His whole body was taut as he slid further in.

“Shit, you’re huge,” I panted, eyes wide as my body stretched. “Give me a second.”

He stopped there, muscles tensed and massive as his chest heaved, his eyes dark and wild.

“Okay, more,” I demanded.

He slid in further, and I inhaled so massively that he paused. His forehead knitted as he stared down at me. “Beasts, this feels too good for me to dive into your emotions. You’ve got to tell me your thoughts.”

“Holy shit, you’re huge,” I repeated, my hands finding his ass.

His hands wrapped around my wrists. “Easy. This is the fucking best thing I’ve ever felt. Push me too fast and it’ll be over before it starts,” he growled. “You should’ve let me get off when I was eating you.”

“I want to feel you finish twice,” I growled back. “More.”

He slid in further.

Beasts, would I even be able to take all of him?

“You’ll get me more than twice with the way you feel, Leviathan. Hit me with your magic while you’re naked and I’ll be gone.”

I laughed breathlessly. “I like the sound of that.”

“Don’t laugh. It feels too good.” His hands covered my abdomen, holding me in place.

“More.”

He slid in further, and I gasped as he bottomed out inside me.

“Beasts, beasts, beasts, beasts,” I chanted, my hands squeezing the hell out of his ass.

“What? Pain?” he snarled.

“No. Just weird. It feels weird. Good weird, though.”

His hand rubbed my tit, and shit, I nearly saw stars, it felt so damned good.

“I’m going to lose it again,” I panted.

“Good.” His mouth dipped to my breast, and the moment his tongue met the burn, I went over.

My body arched, and my cry was louder, hoarser, as I came on his dick.

He throbbed inside me, and he thrust in and out. The movement was overwhelming, and the one orgasm became two, ripping my breath away as a scream tore through me. The rush was so strong, so powerful, I swear I must’ve reached the beasts above.

My eyes opened a few minutes later to find Tuslan staring down at me like he couldn't believe what he'd just seen. He was still hard inside me, still throbbing a bit.

“Well?” I panted.

“Tell me you want to keep going,” he growled back.

“I'll need your energy if you want to do that, but I'm always up for—shit!” I gasped as a wall of energy hit me, perking me up in a rush that may as well have been yet another orgasm. “We can't do this all day,” I panted. “Tendira needs us.”

“Tendira can give us a few damned hours.” His mouth met mine, moving so damn fast my mind spun as my body clenched again, still trying to adjust to the delicious foreign object inside me.

I didn't think Tendira was going to have much of a choice in the matter.



14

We slipped into the bathtub together a few hours later, both of us completely exhausted.

I sat on Tuslan's lap, his arms wrapped around me loosely, avoiding my right breast since it was covered in a love burn. His lips kissed me on the head, cheek, neck, or shoulder randomly, every thirty seconds or so.

When I tuned into his emotions, I found pure bliss nestled in with utter contentment as well as a dose of shock.

"What are you shocked by?" I murmured.

"You." His lips met my shoulder.

"Why?"

"I knew it would feel good, but I never thought... beasts, that was incredible. Better than I imagined—and I imagined it being pretty damn amazing."

His lips parted in a massive yawn.

"It *was* amazing." I pulled his arms tighter around me. Don't fall asleep yet," I warned. "I'm hungry, and you're currently the

only food source I have.”

“Dammit.” He rested his chin on top of my head. My bun was probably half-out or looking like some kind of bush, but he didn’t seem to care. Maybe it made a good chin-pillow or something. “I’ll feed you, then give you my energy, and then crash.”

“I’m jealous,” I sighed.

“After you figure out how to get into that diamonte, you can sleep for a week.”

Yeah, yeah.

“I won’t sleep too long,” he added.

“You’re powering us both right now, Red. Sleep as much as you need to.” I lifted his hand up to my lips, kissing his wet fingertips. They still smelled like me, which satisfied me for some reason. Something moved beneath my ass. “Do you seriously have an erection again already?”

“It’s a turn-on when you try to take care of me.” He kissed my head, cheek, and I tilted to give him my neck. “I’m not trying to start anything, Blue. My body’s just responding to the pure seductiveness of your bare skin.”

“Aww. How sweet,” I drawled.

He chuckled, and his teeth nipped at my neck. It was littered with bitemarks, like many other parts of my body, and I had zero regrets. “Tell me your favorite childhood memory.”

My eyes closed. “You’ll think I’m pathetic, or feel bad for me. Or both.”

He made a noise of disagreement.

“Tell me yours first,” I countered.

He was quiet for a moment, and his chin settled back down on my head. “My mother was gone the day I turned eight. She didn’t think birthdays were worth celebrating after six years old; celebrating birthdays was a sign of weakness, somehow. I didn’t understand the mindset, but spent the day at school and came home to an empty house, then read until it was dark. When I went into the kitchen for a glass of water before bed, I found her sitting at the kitchen table. A wrapped present sat in front of her, and she was staring at it.”

He paused, his fingers slowly stroking my arm. I wasn’t sure whether the contact was for him, or for me. Maybe it was for both of us. “I didn’t ask her what it was; questioning her wasn’t allowed. But after I filled my glass, she told me that she’d seen the item with one of the merchants, and thought of me. That it wasn’t a birthday present, but she wanted me to have it, and told me to go open it in my room. I took it, and left.”

“What was it?”

“A book. Edgar and His Noble Dragon. A children’s fantasy—the kind she always told me not to read, but that I read in hiding when I needed solace. She took every other book I ever had of the genre, but never that one. It was a small gesture—very small, given her other actions, but it was one of the only things she ever did that made me feel loved. And that book kept me sane through some very rough years, strangely enough. When I questioned if she felt even a shred of love for me, I remembered the way I’d found her, staring at that book.”

“Aww, Red,” I turned my head so I could look at him, but he didn’t meet my gaze. “That’s sweet, but also sad.”

His lips lifted in a tiny smile, but he didn’t say anything.

“How did she die?”

“A rebellion in the pack came up. Lava has rebellions every few years or so—no one truly likes the cruel structure. My mom fought for the Alpha, and died for him. I was sixteen.”

“I’m sorry.” I kissed his cheek, and his hand brushed down my arm gently.

“It was for the better. Her death freed me in many ways. Now, your turn.”

“Okay. Picture nine-year-old Mesa.” My hands spread out in front of me, enticing him to picture it.

“Was your hair just as big?” His hand patted the tangled bush on top of my head.

“Bigger. The waves were wavier, and they tangled easier, but that’s beside the point. Nine-year-old Mesa, curled up on the floor of the hallway outside my room, all elbows and knees and hair, with a pillow and a thin blanket and nothing else.”

Tuslan nodded.

“How nine-year-old Mesa got there is beside the point—something pissed Cina off, like always. The guards were

stationed far enough away that I couldn't see them, yet close enough to hear if I'd tried to leave. It was supposed to be two or three days of solitude or something. But a few hours into the punishment, Lennox walked in and asked me if I wanted to sneak away. I definitely did, so he 'snuck' me out. My guards followed, so it wasn't really sneaky, but I thought it was back then."

I continued, "He took me all over the capitol. Bought me candy, and all kinds of desserts. I don't even think we had a real meal—well, maybe one. He bought me new shoes, and my first romance book, which sounds weird but isn't because I was nine and obviously everyone stayed clothed and un-horny. I went back to the castle with bags of new things and the biggest smile, and when things got hard, I remembered all the fun I had that day. How special I felt."

"That's why my gifts didn't work until I gave you the books," Tuslan remarked. "I gave you things, and you wanted experiences."

"Yep. It kind of felt like I was reading the books with you, the way you'd take them and replace them with new ones."

"I *was* reading them with you."

"Well, I know that now. But I didn't know it back then, and it's what softened me up so you could come smash my walls to bits."

"That's not the only part of you I'd like to *smash* to bits."

I snorted. "If that was supposed to be an innuendo, it's terribly outdated."

Tuslan feigned disappointment. “Damn. Could’ve sworn that one was recent.”

“Nope. Not sexy.” I patted him on the arm, feigning comfort. “Better luck next time.”

We washed up and got out, and I headed back to the living room to stare at the diamonte some more, trying to somehow see into its soul or get it to spill Tendira’s secrets to me.

Tuslan brought back food, and after we ate, he gave me his energy and fell asleep on one of the couches. His arms and legs hung off awkwardly, but he didn’t have a problem sleeping anyway.

I’d told him he could go back to the bed, but he wanted to be close to me—and he said if he went back there, he’d smell sex and think about sex and wouldn’t be able to sleep anyway. I wasn’t sure if that was true, but didn’t argue. I liked that he wanted to be near me.

I tapped the diamonte, and talked to the diamonte, and even tried poking it with a fork at one point, but it didn’t budge. I didn’t get any kind of feelings or spirit or soul or anything from it; it just felt and looked like a black diamonte to me.

When Tuslan got up, he sat by me and draped his arm over my shoulders as he tried to help me come up with ways to try to feel it out, but his ideas didn’t work any better than mine, which left me at square one.

And square one was me staring at a glorified rock, yet again.



15

The next few days were both ultra-slow and incredibly fast. I stared at the diamonte while Tuslan fed me and searched for the larger gemstone we'd seen in the carvings on the pillar. When I got angry, he helped me relieve my tension, and then we went back to our respective tasks.

So basically, our days could be described with three s-words:

Staring, sleeping, and sex.

Yay.

After some more pointless staring, on the morning of day five in the golden mountain house, Tuslan set a plate down on my lap. He plucked the ring out of my hand and stuck it on his pinky finger before starting on his own food.

"I think it's time to go back to your lair to try out the diamonte ring," I admitted. "I'm not getting anywhere with this thing. If anything, I'm only getting more pissed."

"You want to give up?" He lifted an eyebrow. "You could be ten minutes from cracking it."

"I could just as easily be ten years from cracking it. And by then, I'll look older than you and everyone else." My nose

wrinkled. “No thanks. The ring could be the answer.”

“Or it could be even more of a dead end than this is.”

“So we’ll fly back there, grab the ring, and come back here.”
I shrugged.

“It’s about two days of travel, even at my speed and in my dragon form. Plus two days down the mountain, before that. Three, on the way up.” He skewered a chunk of meat with his fork and popped it in his mouth, chewing. “Ten days, round trip. A long, uncomfortable time for a small possibility.”

“But I could sleep at your lair. It wouldn’t kill you to spend a night savage, and maybe it would help me somehow. Plus, there’s a chance that I’ll see the other diamonte and magically know what to do.”

He gave me a look that said he didn’t believe in that possibility any more than I did.

“Unless you know of any bigger diamontes anywhere else in the world?”

“If I did, I would’ve bought them already.” He gestured to my plate with his fork. “Eat. We don’t need to decide right now.”

With a sigh, I poked at some kind of root he’d found, eyeing it. It was new.

He explained, “They’re good. Like potatoes, but skinnier.”

I shrugged and took a bite.

Yup, just like a potato.

“How about I remove the diamonte from the gold so we can see if that’s preventing it from communicating with you,” he suggested, eyeing the jewelry on his pinky finger.

I shot him the same dirty look I’d given him the last five times he suggested that.

“You’ve never heard of gold preventing anything from communicating, and I don’t want you to destroy my ring,” I reminded him, ready to snatch the ring back if I needed to. “The last Queen had a fist-sized rock to learn from. Mine’s less than a tenth of that—so obviously it’s going to be harder to crack. The ring one is a few times bigger, so it’ll be easier to communicate with. Theoretically.”

“All of this is theoretic.” He gestured between us. “But if you really want to try that, I’ll take you back to the lair.”

I shot him another dirty look.

“That was phrased poorly. Let me try again—I’d love to take you back to our lair and make love to you there for a few days while you test the larger diamonte,” he restated.

I rolled my eyes, but my lips twitched up toward a grin.

“I’ll keep searching the bookshelves to see if there’s anything that could be helpful. Maybe you should try taking a bath with it,” he suggested.

I already had—three times. It was just a ring, inside a bathtub.

But why not?

I shuffled toward the bathroom, shedding clothes as I went, and filled the tub with floral-scented bubbles.

We needed to anchor the shifters to Soul Mountain, and we needed to rescue the ancient Queen, and we needed to deal with the Tidals somehow...

But to do any of that, I had to figure out how to talk to a damn rock.

Well, I'd mastered talking to *it*. I needed to figure out how to get it to talk *back*.

I talked to the diamonte—at the diamonte—for twenty minutes before Tuslan came in, holding a gigantic book.

"I found it," he told me, wearing a grin.

"What?" I leaned over the edge of the tub, trying to see it.

He turned it so I could read the spine, and I tilted my head. "Origin of the Queens? No way. By Portes?"

"Yep."

"Maybe we should stay a few more days in case it has information," he suggested, eyeing me.

I sighed. “Fine. You have to hold the ring though; I’m so damn tired of this.”

He held a hand out, and I put the ring in it. His gaze swept my body, partially visible in the water thanks to popped bubbles, and his eyes darkened. “The book’s not going anywhere.”

I held my arms out. “Ravage me.”

He grinned, setting the book down on a bare patch of counter space and sweeping me up out of the tub, hauling me to the bed.

We made it back to the bathroom a bit later, and I grabbed the book. I was done talking at the ring, but maybe the origin book would have answers.

Though strangely enough, it wasn’t written by the Queen herself.

The book opened with the same story of the group of travelers leaving the human continent to come to Tendira, but this time, the group was much larger. It consisted of two dozen men and two dozen women—and one of the women’s descriptions sounded a lot like that of the woman I’d seen in the barrier magic.

My forehead wrinkled more with every new chapter I read.

“How many copies of the Origin of Shifters are there?” I asked Tuslan, after reading something entirely opposite of what I’d read in the previous book. He looked up from the book he was reading—something about barrier magic.

“Around two dozen. Mine’s supposedly the original, though I never saw proof of that.”

“What about this?” I pointed to the book. “How many copies?”

He shook his head. “Only one.”

Well, shit.

“It’s the same story, but different. In this version, There are fifty humans who come—half men, and half women. The wild animals are so huge and dangerous that they scare the group to this mountain, with no barrier.” I pointed to the ground beneath us. “The animals chase them to the top, but along the way, one of the guys finds the massive diamonte. When they reach the top, they have nowhere else to go, and one of the women catches the diamonte and it speaks to her.”

Tuslan lifted an eyebrow. “That’s different.”

“No kidding.”

“What happens next?”

“I don’t know. I’ll tell you after I skim it.” I shrugged. The author was still ultra-boring, giving way too many details about everything, but every true bookworm has mastered the art of skimming because some books are just better when you don’t read all of the words.

I continued reading, flipping through the entire rest of the book before turning to Tuslan, pretty much shocked, and telling him the rest of the story.

“So basically, the diamonte taught the woman how to use barrier magic, and she used that magic to create barriers around the remaining humans to protect them. When she trapped their humans, the beasts within them emerged. They all shifted into different beast forms, killing the animals that had chased them up the mountains, and then turning on each other.”

I continued, “Then, the woman hid in a cave in the top of the mountain for a few days while the shifters battled it out and she ‘communed’ with the diamonte. It taught her how to give them something in common by turning them into pack animals—and she chose wolves because they were the only pack animals she knew back in the human continent. But get this—she made herself a wolf too, but retained her humanity to do so—which then, later, gave her the idea of giving everyone else access to their human forms again.”

“That’s the true origin story, according to this.” I gestured to the book. “When there became too many shifters, she grew tired of anchoring them herself and created the Shifter Queen line.”

Tuslan nodded. “It fits with what I read. I think this was by the first Shifter Queen herself.” He tapped the book, and I looked closer at the cover.

“The Theory of Barrier Magic?”

“Yeah. She documents those experiences you explained, but purely from the magic side of them as she’s trying to figure out what barrier magic is, exactly. A few chapters in, she decided that barrier magic is only a tiny shred of the true magic Tendira possesses.”

“What’s Tendira’s true magic, then?” I checked.

“Creation magic.” He lifted the ring toward me. “If you can use this to tap into Tendira’s magic, you’ll be able to create pretty much anything you want, to an extent. She hasn’t figured out how to create life other than the typical reproductive route so far, but it’s a lot more than just barriers.”

He continued, “Her theory is that the magic the Queens possess is the same creation magic that is within Tendira’s soul, but that without reaching into Tendira, you can’t create anything permanent because it relies on your energy and life, which aren’t permanent. But because Tendira is a permanent being with a nearly-limitless energy, you can create things that are relatively permanent with it.”

Yeah, that made my mind spin.

I grimaced. “I’m going to need some time to let that sink in.” My stomach rumbled, and I glanced down at it absentmindedly. “How long have we been reading?”

Tuslan shrugged.

At least he was as lost in the books as I was.

Heading up to the stairs, he checked the sky before coming back down.

“Half the day, at least. Probably more. It’s the middle of the night.”

Damn.

“I’m going to go hunting. Are you okay if I head out?”

“Of course.” I crossed the room, grabbing him by the arms and going up on my tiptoes to kiss him. His head bobbed down, his lips meeting mine, before he headed up the stairs.

Always obsessed with feeding me, that one.

I headed back to the books, finding the ring sitting on the barrier book Tuslan had been reading.

I let out a breath-laugh as I picked the damn thing up. “The old Shifter Queen is absolutely insane if she thinks you’re reaching for me,” I told it. From the book, it sounded like it spoke into her mind somehow, so I tried to reach my mind out toward it. I reached out with my magic, too, the way I had a thousand times already.

Another soft laugh left me. “Bullshit.”

I set the ring back down on the book, heading back to the bathtub to let everything we’d learned soak in.

After a nice long bath, I sat down with the barrier book, and spent all night reading that.



16

The next morning, we packed up my very-few things along with all four of the books that we thought might possibly be helpful, and headed off the mountain. I was in favor of Tuslan shifting forms so the barrier threw us off the mountain while I held on to him for dear life, but he was unamused by the plan, so he carried me down.

The way down was faster than the way up, and we reached the bottom of the mountain at the end of the next day. I continued trying to overcome the diamonte in my ring with sheer willpower while I let Tuslan carry me like I was some poor damsel in distress, but the diamonte didn't open to me.

Tuslan gave me his energy and slept a few hours at the bottom of the mountain before we could finally fly.

My heart soared as we glided over and through the jagged mountains and volcanoes of the Lava Pack. There was no clear divide between any of the pack lands, but shifters could smell the difference—they had people stationed on those lines for that reason.

Though, I assumed there was no one stationed along them at the moment.

We flew through that day. It had occurred to me during my bath the night before that I needed to use my magic to check out

the center of my being, the place I usually found other shifters' human and beast forms. It had never occurred to me that I might have multiple forms, because I was a human—or at least, I was supposed to be a human.

What if I wasn't human at all?

I decided to deal with that problem or potential not-problem after we were back at the lair, wearing clean clothes. And after sleeping in a clean bed that belonged to us.

I didn't have the energy for an existential crisis yet.

Sleep, then crisis.

Beasts, it would feel good to close my eyes and just sleep for a while. Tuslan's energy kept me alive and awake, but I just needed to let my mind *rest*.

After a two-hour break in the middle of the night, Tuslan got back up and flew us straight to the lair—minus a few short food stops. The sun was rising two days later when we finally reached our tower.

Tuslan left me in the shower with the promise of incoming food. I tried to persuade him to stay with me so we could just skip a meal, but he wasn't on board.

I showered off dirt, sweat, and grease before slipping over to Tuslan's bathtub. The one in Soul Mountain was pretty big, but Tuslan's was bigger. And better.

Sitting in the tub, bathing in honey-scented bubbles, I felt like I finally relaxed for the first time in weeks, if not months.

We would fix the other shifters, and rescue the Queen, followed by the other ex-Queens, and then we'd... live happily ever after? Reign as Blood Queen and Alpha? Feast on the hearts of our enemies while popping out babies once a century?

Honestly, I had no idea.

Whatever happened, at least we'd be alive, and back with our pack, and together. That was what mattered.

My eyes grew heavy as I soaked. I fought to keep them open, knowing my subconscious would release my barrier on Tuslan if I slept for more than a few minutes.

Though I fought hard, I lost the battle.

"Mesa," Tuslan's soft murmur woke me up. It must've only been a few minutes later, since he was still in human form. My subconscious was holding on to the tiniest shred of magic that held his forms together.

I blinked sleepy eyes at him.

Tuslan's lips curved upward. "You're asleep in a bathtub."

I glanced down at the water, blinking a few more times. "Whoops."

"I take it I don't need to warn you that sleeping in a tub is dangerous?"

I glared at him with all the might I could muster, still mostly-asleep. Let me tell you, it wasn't much.

"Come on, Leviathan." His arms slipped around me as he helped ease me up to my feet. I wobbled, unsteady, and he all but lifted me out of the tub. His hand stayed on my arm as he stepped away to grab a towel, and he wrapped it carefully around me.

Then his flames came in, drying me off.

Glorious, glorious fire.

I leaned heavily against him as he wrapped me in a silky black robe and then helped me walk to the bed. He tucked me under the covers, moving my hair out from under my neck as if he knew it was going to bug me. "I'll grab your food," he murmured. "Wait here."

My head bobbed, and he disappeared.

My eyes shut, and opened again when a rough, gentle hand brushed hair off my face. "You've got to wake up and eat, Mesa. You get angry when you're hungry."

I made a face. Even mostly-asleep, I knew that was true.

He lifted a fork to my mouth, and I obediently accepted a bite of meat.

He slowly fed me for the next few minutes, until I rolled away from him.

“Let go of the barrier, Leviathan. You need real sleep,” he murmured, his hand moving slowly in a circle on my back.

“Are you sure?” I mumbled.

He chuckled. “It’s incredible that you’ve held it this long. Thank you. Now, rest. You can bring me back when you wake up.”

I unwrapped the barrier attaching his human form to his others, and promptly fell the rest of the way asleep.

His clean, furry body joined mine in bed shortly afterward. Though I missed his skin, I was happy to snuggle up with him in his furry form too.

It was still dark outside when I woke up, but my body felt so relaxed that I knew I’d slept somewhere around twenty-four hours, not only one or two.

Tuslan licked my face when I sat up, and I snorted and pushed his head away.

My fingers dug into his fur a moment later though, scratching his head silently as I reached back into his subconscious. Putting the barrier back up how it had been was easy enough, and just like that, the wolf shifted back to my favorite one of his forms.

His hands caught my face, and his tongue swept into my mouth. “I love you,” he murmured, before the kiss could turn into something more.

“I love you too.” Rolling over, I wrapped my arms around him. “I need to go try to figure out the damn diamonte.”

“And I need to get us some cooking supplies. I’m going to raid the kitchen in the nearest city, to see if they have anything salvageable so I don’t have to keep leaving.”

“That sounds awesome.” I kissed him on the cheek, and when he turned to give me his mouth, on the lips too.

The kiss deepened, but I extricated myself from his grip with a sigh. “We really need to get going.”

He sighed. “I know.”

We both got dressed, and he kissed me again before he headed out while I walked down the stairs. The bandeau and pants were a black set I hadn’t worn before, and beasts, they had to be one of the most comfortable things I’d ever wrapped my body in.

“There you are,” I told the manly diamonte ring, plucking it up off the counter.

I didn’t expect it to respond, of course, but the moment it met my fingers, I felt what the original Queen had mentioned.

Reaching.

It was like some sort of consciousness was reaching out to me, trying to grab me or something. It almost felt similar to my connection with Tuslan, but there was no heartbeat, and no emotions.

The consciousness touched my mind, and the lair vanished as a vision took over.

I saw myself on the beach, kneeling in the sand with my hands buried in wet dirt. My eyes were closed, and the tide washed over the bottom few inches of me before rolling back to meet the ocean behind it. Another wave crashed, rolling over me once again.

“You want me to go to the beach?” I asked the diamonte.

The vision remained.

“Who are you? How are you communicating with me? Do you have feelings, or can you talk at all?” I asked it, just speaking out loud and assuming it could understand me.

The vision shifted, making me feel like the world was tilting, and I caught myself on a tree.

Sitting next to the tree was a massive black diamonte, as big as a boulder.

“You’re trying to tell me that you’re like a tree?” I asked it, assuming I was supposed to compare them. “You both have lives. Do trees have souls? I don’t know. I guess it makes sense that if you’re both alive but can’t really communicate well, you’re similar.”

The vision went back to me, at the beach.

“I guess that’s how I’m supposed to connect with Tendira’s magic?” I wondered. “Alright, I’ll go to the beach. I just have to wait for—” the vision cleared. “Tuslan,” I finished. “Guess you really want me to go,” I told it.

I slid the black ring onto my middle finger, but it was way too big, so I grabbed a thin golden chain off one of Tuslan's many jewelry dressers and slipped the ring on the chain before fastening it around my neck.

Walking back upstairs, I sat back down with the barrier book and read for a bit until Tuslan came back. While we put away the groceries he'd scavenged for us, I explained what had happened, and then we headed out to the beach through a secret door in the very bottom floor of the lair—a hidden basement I hadn't noticed before. It held random stuff, like a misshapen beanie and a canvas with some paint jars nearby and a stack of old reference books.

We walked out onto the island's beach. I hadn't seen anything in the background when I saw the vision, just me kneeling in the sand with the ocean out in front of me, but I didn't think location matter so much as what I did there.

Stripping off my pants, I dropped them on the dry sand and headed out toward the water. Tuslan walked with me.

"Be careful," he warned. "If you feel anything, the magic will be powerful. Be ready to get out fast. You can use our connection if you need to."

I nodded, and he stepped back to give me just a little more space.

Lowering myself to my knees on the damp sand, I moved it a bit so it didn't dig into my flesh before the tide rolled over my skin, chilling me as I sank my fingers into the sand in front of me.

My eyes closed, and I waited.

And waited.

And waited.

I finally peeked one eye open, looking around for something that might have changed.

“What’s wrong?” Tuslan asked me.

“I’m not sure. Nothing’s happening yet, but I’ll figure it out.”

My eyes closed again, and I reached for the diamonte.

It was already reaching back.

The same vision appeared again, but this time, it showed me something that looked like magic vibrating beneath the sand. It shined like bits of glass woven into the ground.

“Okay, I’ll look for barrier magic,” I murmured.

The vision didn’t disappear.

“Creation magic,” I finally corrected myself. “That’s the real name for it, right?”

The vision vanished, and I swept my gaze over the beach, my hands still buried in the sand.

I reached my magic into it until I brushed up against what I was looking for.

A barrier.

Or rather, some kind of creative bubble?

I didn't know what to call it, but it was there.

It latched onto me in one swoop, and the world around me suddenly blossomed to life right in front of my eyes.

Smooth, glass-like lines spread out all around me. They surrounded everything, breathing life into the trees, the sand, the ocean, the wind... everything I could see belonged to the creative magic.

The legends were wrong. I wasn't the Soul of Tendira, or the Pillar of the Wolves, or the Anchor of the Beasts. Tendira's Soul breathed life into our continent, and I was just someone with a minimal amount of access to that power.

Beasts, the magic in Tendira was breathtaking.

I watched the magic move over the rocks and sand and ocean and sky, shining the same way my magic always had. I'd thought of it like a second skin, but it wasn't skin at all—it was the continent, anchoring me and strengthening me.

The shifters had fallen when I died, but that wasn't because of me—that was because of the first Queen's magic. And I could anchor them to Tendira's Soul, the way the ancient Queen said she should've done in the first place. They didn't need me—they needed Tendira's Soul. I was just a vessel for the land's magic.

Another vision stole my sight, replacing the calm beach with an image of me, using not my magic but Tendira's, to separate Tuslan's forms.

"Can I try something on you?" I called behind me. "You might go savage for a minute."

"As long as this isn't your way of freeing yourself from our lalidro," he called back.

"If it is, you'll never know."

He approached me, kneeling beside me. He didn't give a shit about his pants getting wet or dirty, just taking my hand in his. He knew physical contact made my magic easier for me sometimes.

I unraveled the barrier I'd built in his mind, keeping a gentle hold on the fur around his neck.

With my eyes open, I watched the constant movement of Tendira's magic before I realized it had a simple flow.

Taking the magic by the balls, metaphorically, I acted like it was my own and wrestled a chunk of it away from the collective mass, following the current of the magic for a moment before blazing a trail up toward Tuslan's consciousness with it.

The magic reached that part of him easily, and it followed my command with little effort as I wove it around his forms one by one.

When I finished wrapping him in my power, I released the strands of the magic and stepped back, letting it go. The magic

kicked in nearly immediately, and Tuslan shifted again. This time, the magic holding his forms together was old and permanent.

He shifted back to human, catching me in his arms as I waited for the exhaustion that always accompanied the use of magic to kick in.

But it didn't come.

I hadn't even used my own magic.

I felt a little tired just from the effort of wrestling with Tendira's power, but there was no drain to maintaining the barrier. It was just... there.

Tuslan's hands patted his body up and down while he checked for injuries.

"I feel different," he said, his voice surprised. "What did you do?"

"Solidified the connection between your forms. You'll never go savage again... unless you choose to."

His eyebrows lifted, his eyes impressed. "That easily?"

I huffed out a laugh. "It wasn't that easy, but yeah. I'll have to start practicing on our pack before we go around the rest of Tendira, anchoring all the shifters. Even with a net, I don't think I can catch them all at once."

“We’ll do whatever it takes.” He sat beside me on the sand as I closed my eyes and focused once again on the world around us.



17

I stayed on the beach for a long time, wrestling Tendira's magic and trying to form it into a net the way I had my own magic, but anything larger than what I'd done with Tuslan took serious effort.

When I was so exhausted that I could barely hold myself up anymore, Tuslan declared that my day was over.

I was too tired to argue.

He scooped my sandy, wet body up in one fluid motion before carrying me back to the tower. He went up the stairs, staying in his human form, and my head rested against his shoulder and neck as we went. The movement relaxed me so much that I was pretty sure I could've fallen asleep given another minute or two.

But, he carried me up to the bedroom floor and set me down on my feet instead. He started the water in the bathtub before turning back to me.

"Arms up," he said lightly.

I lifted my arms, and he peeled my bandeau over my head. My pants followed, and then he helped me slip into the tub, even while I struggled to keep my eyes open.

He bent over the tub and his lips met my forehead, not seeming to mind that I was sticky with dried sweat, saltwater, and sand. "I'll be back up with food soon."

"Thanks," I murmured.

He kissed my lips, then headed toward the stairs.

My eyes closed, and I couldn't keep those suckers open even if I tried. But my mind was still moving, running over what I'd learned on the beach. Remembering the power in the world beneath me, around me.

Beasts, it was insane.

Not barrier magic... creation magic. Who knew?

Not me, that was for sure.

Though maybe I should've guessed it, since I was constantly coming up with new forms for my magic to take.

My mind went back to the book, and to the first Shifter Queen who had turned into a wolf.

What if I'd been a shifter all along?

What if I could've saved myself back in the castle, when I begged Tuslan for his magic? I hadn't even really looked inward, had I? I knew I'd never been in that part of my consciousness where my human form was; I'd never even

considered looking there. When you're told your whole life that you're human, why bother?

"No more putting it off, Mesa," I murmured to myself. "You're badass. So badass."

The last part wasn't really necessary, but... it kinda was.

With my eyes still shut, I slipped my magic into the place my forms would rest if I was a shifter. It was more slippery somehow, since it was my own, and took a fair amount of effort to delve into.

"What are you talking yourself into?" Tuslan asked me, somehow managing to both scare the shit out of me and rip me away from my own soul at the same time. I jumped at his voice, my eyes opening as his hand met my shoulder softly. "Sorry, Blue."

"It's fine." I gave him a quick, tentative smile. He was holding a plate of food, and wearing clothes, so I thought of the perfect fix immediately. "Take a bath with me."

He handed the plate over, stripping his pants off. His happiness met me as I reached out mentally for our bond.

"Sorry I've been ignoring you today," I apologized, popping a chunk of cheese in my mouth. The plate was loaded with cheeses, meats, and crackers, as well as a few fruits and vegetables, reminding me of the tray we'd shared that first evening in my castle.

He stepped into the tub with me, getting settled opposite of me. Our legs tangled together, and something about the steady feel of his limbs against mine made me feel like everything was

still right in the world. “Why would you apologize for focusing on trying to save Tendira?”

I shrugged. “I don’t want to save Tendira if it costs me you. I’m too selfish for that.”

His hand skimmed my knee. “I’ll never let it come to that.”

“I know. But that’s why I’m worrying about you, so let me worry.”

He grabbed some food. “So what was the pep-talk for?”

“I still haven’t checked out my... consciousness to see if I have any more forms. I’m a little freaked out about the possibility that I’ve been a shifter this whole time.”

“Have you ever shifted forms?” he asked.

“No. Of course not.”

“Then you’re not a shifter. After you’ve managed to shift, you can claim the title. Until then, your senses and everything else about you are human.”

I blinked at him.

There was something about that logic that I liked tremendously.

Probably because it was less earth-shaking than the thought that I’d been something different than what I’d thought I’d known my entire life.

“What if I am? Does that... change anything between us?” I was almost positive I knew the answer, but I asked anyway.

He gave me a dark, unamused look, his hand lingering where he'd put it on my knee. I could feel that he wasn't mad—he just didn't want me to entertain that thought.

“I didn't think so.” I threw some more food down my throat.

“Give me your hand.” He held his out to me.

I obediently slipped my fingers into his.

“Close your eyes, and check.”

With a sigh, I followed his command.

The steady comfort of his grip anchored me while my magic slid back to the place my soul resided.

Manipulating the magic was slightly easier the second time around, and before I knew it, I found myself within that place that held all of my forms.

If I were human, I'd expect to see one lone form.

But that wasn't what I found.

In the place where most shifters had two, three, or four forms, I had...

I counted them again, just to be sure.

Twelve.

Twelve?

That couldn't be right.

I counted a third time as the shock began to set in.

They were all separate, the way a baby shifter's two forms were at birth. And the human one was much, much bigger than the others.

But they existed.

I didn't touch them with my magic. No way in hell did I want to set off some kind of chain reaction where I ended up a damned twelve-form shifter. Deciding to shift to just one form wasn't a decision to take lightly, because as Tuslan had showed me, every form affection your personality so thoroughly that it was hard to tell where a person started and stopped.

And I didn't want to lose myself to what were apparently the beasts within.

I focused on the largest form other than my humanity, and much to my surprise, it was a phoenix.

I was a phoenix.

Or I could be, if I decided to.

The third-largest was a leviathan, and the fourth was a wolf. But given that all of the shifters in Tendira had a wolf form, that fourth one seemed like a given.

The differences in size between the others was small. Minuscule, even.

Which didn't surprise me, since I hadn't known they existed.

With one last glance at the mass of forms within me, I slipped back out of my magic's center and opened my eyes.

Tuslan's hand still held mine gently, his dark eyes on mine, waiting.

"I could be a shifter if I wanted to," I admitted. "A powerful one."

"How powerful?"

I grimaced. "How do you feel about being mated to someone stronger than you?"

He flashed me a dark grin. "The amra will keep our magic equal. If either of us grows, the other will too."

Right.

That was good.

“I could shift into any form I wanted, with enough effort,” I finally said. “It would take a decent amount of time to strengthen that form enough to remain in it, and maybe some pain? I’m not sure how it works, but my human form is much bigger than any of the others right now. And in a healthy shifters, the forms are all balanced.”

His eyebrows knitted a bit, and he nodded slowly. “So the forms are there, but they’re not yours yet.”

“Right. I think.” I bobbed my head. “I don’t know what will happen, exactly, if I shift into one. I might be trapped in that form for a bit until that form’s strong enough to stay tied to my human one. But maybe not—I don’t know.”

“Which is your largest beast form?”

“Phoenix, and then Leviathan,” I admitted.

His lips curved up in a soft smile, his eyes growing proud. “What did I tell you?”

“That if I was a shifter, I’d be a leviathan.” My lips parted, and I tilted my head back to rest against the edge of the tub.

“Eat some more before you fall asleep,” he warned.

I blindly reached for a piece of food, and he put some cheese in my hand. Throwing it down the hatchet, I let my eyes close again. “I don’t know if I want to be a twelve-form shifter,” I said quietly. “I don’t even know if I want to be a shifter at all. I mean, I’ve always kind of wanted to be a shifter, like the rest of you. But I also like who I am. And beasts, if that other Queen comes out of her mountain tower, and wants to do my job for

me... I don't even know if I'd fight her on it. I don't know if I want to be Queen at all."

"Before I met you, I formed an opinion that the most beautiful part of life is the ability to reinvent oneself again, and again, as many times as a person chooses," Tuslan's fingers moved slowly over my knee, and the motion was calming. "The Blood Pack is the place people from every other pack come when they want a fresh start. It was that for you, too, and will be as many times as you wish it to be."

"Doesn't love change when a person changes, though?" I wondered.

"People change constantly. If love was dependent on a certain characteristic or trait, it would never last. True love is a vow to love every version of the person you choose. It's always a decision, Mesa. And it'll always change, as long as we're changing, and I look forward to the excitement of growing alongside you."

My lips curved upward. "Charming bastard."

He chuckled. "Have some more food so we can go to sleep, Leviathan."

Suddenly, the name felt less like a playful tease, and more... real.

I could really be a leviathan.

I could really be a shifter.

If I hadn't been so exhausted, the thought would've taken my breath away.

"I'll think about it in the morning," I murmured to myself.

Tuslan didn't remark on my quiet words, but lifted my hand out of the water and put a few more pieces of food in it.

I ate them with my eyes closed, and the water moved as Tuslan somehow managed to slip his gigantic body around to my side of the tub, carefully folding me into his arms.

His breath brushed my neck, and I peeked an eye open a tiny bit as he grabbed a cup off the ground and dipped it in the tub, filling it with water. "I'm going to wash your hair."

"Mm'kay." I closed my eyes again, tilting my head back so the water wouldn't splash in my eyes.

He washed my hair, then helped me dry off, and hauled me over to the bed.

Tucking us both in, he wrapped me in his arms and held my body against his, and we slept.



18

We headed back to the beach the next day. On our way down the stairs, I asked Tuslan, “Did you see anyone when you went to that city?”

“Yes. It seems like most of the wolves returned back to their homes. Though they can’t enter them, they’re walking the perimeters and protecting their space.”

I nodded, but frowned. “Do you think our friends did the same?”

“Probably. A wolf’s basest instincts are to protect their pack, and to protect their territory. I’m sure when the fighting ended, that’s what they split up to go do.”

“You protected me, though,” I pointed out.

“The instinct to protect one’s mate is stronger than the one to protect pack or territory.” He shrugged. “I’m sure it’s the same with children, too. But even shifters with mates or children would have the urge to bring their families home so they could protect them there.”

That made sense, I supposed.

“I’ll spend the next few days trying to manipulate the creation magic into what I need it to be, but if I can’t figure it out, I’ll need someone to test on. I’m not going to screw it up or anything, so it may as well be our people.”

He agreed, as our feet touched the sand. “What do you think about shifting forms?”

“I haven’t thought much about it,” I admitted. “But I think I should probably wait until after we get the shifters anchored to Soul Mountain, just in case I can’t shift back for a while or something.”

“Sounds like a wise decision, Blood Queen.” He flashed me a grin, and I mirrored the expression.

Our toes met the sand, and the ocean stole our attention.

“Would you mind if I went for a swim?” Tuslan asked me, his gaze on the waves. It had been a long time since he was in his leviathan form, and I knew it was hard on shifters not to shift often.

“Of course not. If I need a break, I’ll come out and join you.”

His lips met mine, and I watched his ass as he stripped out of his pants and strode into the ocean.

Damn, I was lucky.

The next few days were slow, but full. Tendira’s power kicked my ass, but since it was literally the power to create, I didn’t feel defeated by it. I was actually pretty proud of the effort I had made in just a few days.

But I didn't think I was anywhere near ready to anchor all of the beasts to Soul Mountain. I couldn't even track Tendira's magic to the next-closest shifter, and the next-closest shifter was a hell of a lot closer than Soul Mountain was.

A week had gone by when we decided to head back to the capitol.

Tuslan shifted into his dragon form, and I slipped onto his back. I was feeling pretty apprehensive about going back after the way I'd left things, since I'd been lying about who I was the last time I was in the Blood Capitol.

But I knew the stress was pointless, so I just kind of ignored it.

Tuslan took off from the ground, and the wind blew my hair back as I held on tightly to him. My eyes closed, and I let myself just relish the moment for a while.

Everything wasn't right with the world yet, but it would be. And we would get there. We still had each other, and though our relationship wasn't permanent yet, we were so close I could almost taste it.

The flight wasn't short, but compared to our last few treks, it passed in the blink of an eye. Tuslan landed in a bit of space between the group of houses that belonged to the Lead Wolves and me. And... probably Tuslan, too. I had never been inside his house, or even really walked all that close to it. It was tucked at the back of the house cluster, and I'd never seen any of the Lead Wolves go near it, either.

"Am I a Lead Wolf?" I wondered aloud.

“No. Even if you weren’t the Queen, the Alpha’s mate ranks far above a Lead Wolf. You may as well be a co-ruler, since we both know I’ll listen to what you have to say as well as you listen to me.”

“If by ‘listen to what you have to say’ you mean ‘debate with you,’ then yes, I know that.”

He flashed me a smirk. “Exactly.”

I didn’t mind the idea, though I couldn’t have cared less about ranking in a pack.

Tuslan’s smirk vanished all the sudden, and his head jerked to the side. “Shit. Stay here.” He took off down the sidewalk at a jog.

“What the hell?” I asked aloud.

And of course, I headed after him immediately. Why wouldn’t I?

I arrived in the middle of a fight.

A gingery wolf I recognized as Alyx was trying to rip apart a much larger, much bloodier wolf with marbled gray fur. If they’d been fighting, she’d definitely been winning.

But...

Tuslan was in his wolf form, snapping and snarling and wrestling with Alyx, not the gray wolf.

What was going on?

Tuslan got them separated, but Alyx's wolf didn't even hesitate to launch back at the gray male she'd bloodied up. He'd taken a few steps back, but didn't seem like he was hiding from her.

Rather than wait to let them duke it out, I reached into their consciousnesses and tied barriers made of my own magic around their forms, setting their humanity back where it was meant to be.

The moment the barriers stopped moving, the savage wolves shifted.

Alyx slammed into Tuslan, thanks to the motion she already had going for her, but he didn't stagger. He shifted, catching her by the arms and... holding her back?

"Let me go," she snarled at him. She didn't have a single injury, unlike the man Tuslan was holding her away from.

My gaze swung to him.

Nearly as tall as Tuslan, nearly as strong, too. Based on the sizes of the other Lead Wolves, I was going to guess he was at least a three-form shifter, maybe a four-form. His dark brown skin was covered in scars, and his thick black hair was dripping in blood.

It seemed like Alyx was probably the reason for the bloody hair though.

“I knew what he was doing the whole time he was here,” Tuslan growled back at her. “I knew he’d been sent to spy on us, but I wanted to see what Lava was looking for, so I let him stay. That night he told you, you were in hysterics. You didn’t make sure he was dead, and I brought him back from death’s doorstep. He’s been spying on the Fringe pack for me ever since.”

Alyx’s lips parted, her expression transitioning from enraged to stunned and then cycling back and forth like she couldn’t decide which emotion to stick with.

“Wait, is this Dovu?” I interrupted.

He looked at me, finally peeling his gaze off of Alyx now that Tuslan was keeping her from attacking him.

Suddenly, her lack of injuries and his plethora of blood made sense.

“Who are you?” he asked.

I opened my mouth to tell him my name but Tuslan beat me to the punch.

“Mesa Royal Blood, the Shifter Queen, my female.”

Well, that was quite the introduction. Pros to having a mate skilled with words, I guess.

Dovu’s eyebrows shot upward. “You finally competed in a desedra?”

“He finally fell in love,” Alyx snarled back. “He only competed because he couldn’t stand the thought of her with anyone else.”

Ouch.

I mean, it was true. But still... ouch.

“Why did you come back here?” Tuslan asked Dovu, changing the subject away from us.

Dovu’s expression darkened. “I didn’t, consciously. But my beasts still consider this home.”

“I didn’t find you at your old place, I found you at mine,” Alyx shot back.

He didn’t respond, his gaze steady on her.

Oh.

Aww.

“His beasts still consider *you* home, Alyx,” I said, feeling a bit mushy about the whole thing.

“I got that,” she growled back.

“Don’t snap at her,” Tuslan growled at Alyx.

Sheesh, this whole thing was a growl-fest.

“Dovu, you can go wait in Paik’s house or something. We need to find the others so I can give them back their sanity, and then we can figure out what to do about this.” I gestured between the two of them.

“He can wait in the interim apartment building,” Alyx snapped back.

“He can wait in the meeting house,” Tuslan corrected. “I can smell the others, so this shouldn’t take long.”

That was good, at least.

Dovu headed one way, and the other three of us went the other.

“Are Keena and Tomo fighting too?” I asked Tuslan and Alyx, sensing that was not the time to ask Alyx all of her feelings about the ex she thought she’d killed returning.

“No. Her wolf’s like a big puppy around him. He’s been prancing around all proudly, guarding her, ever since we got back here,” Alyx grumbled. “We all knew it was just her human stubbornness coming between them.”

I grimaced. “She’s going to be pissed about that, then.”

“Or she’s going to fall into his arms and apologize for ever doubting their eternal love,” Alyx drawled.

“Damn, you’re sassy when you’re pissed. I like it,” I teased her.

She gave me a grudging smile. “And you’re cute when you’re all sexed-up and happy.”

I rolled my eyes. “We haven’t even done it yet,” I lied.

She snorted. “You reek of it.”

“I took a bath...” I lifted my arm, sniffing my pit.

“You don’t reek of anything, Blue.” Tuslan’s arm snaked around my waist. “Other than absolute pleasure and devotion.”

I scoffed, and she grinned. “Told you.”

Tuslan maneuvered me behind him as we approached.

“You don’t sideline a twelve-form,” I grumbled at his back.

“A *what?*” Alyx asked.

“We’ll explain later,” Tuslan rumbled. “And Leviathan, until I see you in scales, fur, and feathers, you’re my Human Queen.”

Damn overprotective bastard.

I heard a low growl out in front of us, and Tuslan responded calmly. I didn’t hear his exact words as I focused on reaching inside the wolves out in the forest. Though I couldn’t see them, thanks to my new awareness and feeling for Tendira’s magic, I was figuring out how I could feel them.

I heard voices but had to grab Tuslan's arm to hold myself up at the sudden influx of strain on my energy.

Shit.

Dovu.

"What's wrong?" someone asked.

A thumb slid beneath my nose, and a soft hand slipped gently around the back of my neck to cup my head. Tuslan's energy snaked into me through our bond, and everything grew steadier. "She's just feeling the drain of the magic," he explained for me, though all of his attention remained on me and my face.

"I shouldn't have had Dovu leave," I admitted, as Tuslan wiped beneath my nose for me again. He lifted his finger, showing me blood.

"You said that barrier wasn't hard to hold up when you used it on me."

"It wasn't. I—" I cut myself off when the diamonte's magic reached for me, my own power subconsciously reaching back. A vision engulfed me, and I found myself standing in a dark house. My arms were spread out painfully-far, and my face contorted. In one of my hands, I held a line of Tendira's magic, holding the thrumming energy in my hand.

In the other, I held my own barrier magic.

The vision version of my face contorted as both sides pulled on me.

“They’re the same magic,” I told the diamonte. “Creation magic and creation magic. Why would they rip me apart? What does that have to do with—”

The vision faded, and the diamonte’s energy vanished.

That damn fickle rock.

“What the hell is going on with you? I feel like we missed a lot,” Keena said, throwing her arms around me and hugging me tight from behind, ignoring the fact that Tuslan’s arms were still around my waist as he held me to him.

“You missed a lot,” I agreed.

Keena released me, and Tuslan’s fire burned away the blood beneath my nose. “What did you see?” he asked.

“I’ll tell you later. We’re still missing...”

Paik and Ellery trotted up to our group, his tongue lolling out to the side as he sat down and stared at us. She remained standing, a few feet of air between them.

I reached my magic out toward them before Tuslan could tell me not to do it, and wrapped them in a barrier. I’d have liked to use Tendira’s magic to do it, but then I would have to find other shifters to practice on.

Tuslan fed more of his energy through our connection before I could get dizzy again, and luckily, my nose didn’t bleed.

“Well, now that we’re all back together,” I began, then trailed off as the tug of all of the magic seemed to yank at my chest.

“Back to Dovu. Sorry Alyx,” Tuslan scooped me up and strode toward the meeting house we’d always used. I knew he wanted to jog, but if they didn’t stick with us, he knew the drain on my magic would get worse.



19

We filled everyone in on what had happened pretty fast, and received shock in response, all around the room.

“Well, damn,” Keena whistled. “I volunteer Tomo as the first test subject.”

Snorts went around the room. “To have the right to volunteer me, you’d have to be my mate,” Tomo remarked.

I waited for her rage, but it didn’t come.

Instead, she flashed him a grin. “In your dreams.”

“Every night,” he agreed.

There was an awkward pause after that.

Ellery cleared her throat. “So you’re telling me that every Queen we’ve ever had isn’t a human, but a *shifter*?”

“A potential shifter. We’ve just never been taught to shift, or allowed to access our other forms.” I shrugged. “I’ll help them all shift after all this is over, if that’s what they want.”

Given all the shit most of them were dealing with in their homes, I imagined most of them would want it. Claws were a protection the ex-Queens needed. Some of them, desperately.

“You can start with me. It’s fine if I get stuck in one of my forms; I won’t have family looking for me or anything,” Ellery added.

“We’re family, aren’t we? And all of the Queens would be looking for you,” I pointed out. “But that’s besides the point, since I’m not going to trap you in one of your forms.”

“Nah, I want to go first. I want to feel this weird magic.” Paik wiggled his fingers around.

Yeah, right.

More like he didn’t want Ellery to be the first test subject. No one could ignore the amount of time he spent staring at her when she wasn’t looking.

I wasn’t going to argue though, because I did need a first test subject and Paik was volunteering.

And it wasn’t like I had no idea what I was doing, so nothing bad would happen to him.

Hopefully.

“What should the rest of us do, Mesa?” Keena asked, kicking her legs up on the ottoman in front of the couch.

“Find something for lunch?”

“I’ll do that. None of them can be away from you right now,”
Tuslan reminded me.

Shit.

Right.

“Tomo, make sure no one goes more than a house’s distance
from Mesa,” he told his friend.

Tomo’s head bobbed.

Tuslan kissed me and took off before I could argue about
having a babysitter, and I felt his smugness through the bond at
the quick way he ditched me with that one.

Bastard.

But like he said, he was my bastard, so it was fine.

“Alright, I need to be out in nature,” I told Paik, gesturing
outside. “The rest of you need to shower, ‘cause no offense, but
you all reek.”

They tossed teasing insults, but we all headed out to Alyx’s
and Paik’s place. The girls went into her house and the
remaining guys went into his, while Paik and I headed to a
grassy spot between the two buildings.

“You want to feel weird magic, huh?” I teased Paik, as I
dropped to my ass on the grass and tugged my shoes off. The

boots hit the ground one after another, and then my socks followed them.

“Of course.” He didn’t bat an eye at the lie.

“I think you’re just trying to look out for Ellery. I’ve noticed you staring at her, you know.”

“Of course you have. But I asked her to go flying with me, and she said no. She made it clear how she feels about man-whores, as she so lovingly put it. So quit it with the matchmaker-thoughts running through your mind right now.”

I frowned. “I’m sorry.”

“Me too.” He shrugged. “Never thought being a good guy would bite me in the ass, but hey. Shit happens.”

I lifted an eyebrow.

He lifted one back. “What?”

“I’m going to sound like a bitch if I ask the question I want to ask, but I don’t mean it bitch-ily.”

He flashed me a smirk. “Then ask it.”

“In all seriousness, why do you sleep around? I’m not trying to be judgy—or bitchy—but shifters don’t really do that. So why do you?”

“My sister was raped and killed while she was in heat.” He said it a hell of a lot more steadily than I would’ve. “She had a

few other women with her, but we were from Sand, so none of them were fighters. I killed the bastard who hurt her, but it was too late for her.”

He continued, “Women are more vulnerable while they’re in heat, and I don’t want them to be unprotected, so I make it clear that I’m willing to protect anyone who doesn’t want to go through heat alone and isn’t close enough with a group of strong women to ask them. I have sex with some of them—not all, or even most—but it’s not emotional. It’s to make them more comfortable. And if that makes me a bad guy, I guess I’m fine with joining the beasts below when my time comes.”

That was only about a thousand miles from what I’d expected him to say.

“Wow. I’m so sorry.” I reached for his hand, but he shot me a teasing smile and moved his away.

“I don’t want to smell like you, woman. Do you know what happens to me if Tuslan comes back here and smells me on your skin?” he motioned his finger cutting across his throat, and I rolled my eyes.

“He wouldn’t kill you.”

“Yeah, he would,” Tomo said, striding out of Paik’s house with wet hair and fresh clothes. “Assuming you didn’t throw yourself into his arms to stop him, which you would. So no, Tuslan wouldn’t kill him. Probably.”

Yeesh.

I remembered the sandwich thing back at my castle, and thought Tomo might be right about that one.

“Alright, how does this work?” Paik changed the subject back to the problem on hand.

“I don’t really know,” I admitted. “Theoretically I should be able to catch you in a magical net and connect that net to Soul Mountain, but so far I haven’t managed to even create a net.” I paused, and the diamonte’s magic reached for me. “Shit. Just a second.”

The diamonte showed me another vision.

It was the fire back in the Royal Capitol. I watched myself fighting the fire, watched my barrier go up, netting the air and slowly stifling the power.

Then, unlike what had really happened, the fire burned through my net and my magic disintegrated.

The vision disappeared.

“Well, that felt like a bad omen,” I remarked.

“Your nose is bleeding again,” Paik plucked a leaf off a nearby bush and handed it over.

“What am I supposed to do with this?”

He mimed wiping under his nose with an invisible leaf, and I made a face before tossing it. “I’m not cleaning my nose with a damned leaf, Paik. You can—”

“Here.” Tomo handed me a tissue. I hadn’t even noticed him disappear to go inside and grab one, but I accepted it with a thank-you and dabbed at my nose. “That was the black diamonte?” he asked.

I nodded.

“What did you see?”

“I’ve been trying to recreate a net I made to put out a fire. It’s not working. I think the diamonte’s trying to tell me that’s not the kind of net I need? I’m not sure, though, because what other kind of nets are there?”

“Sometimes ‘net’ just means all,” Tomo offered.

I hadn’t considered that.

I mean yes, obviously, I knew that other meaning for the word. But when she’d said “net” the first place my mind had gone was to the literal net I made in the Royal Pack.

And how would I collect all of the shifters?

My shoulders sagged a bit.

I was back to square one... or square zero, since I officially had no ideas.

“How does it work? Maybe we can help you figure it out,” Ellery suggested, striding out of the house. She sat down on the grass beside me and Paik, and Tomo sat down a few feet away too, his legs sprawling out in front of him.

“It’s kind of like a heartbeat,” I admitted, my mind going back to the connection in my abdomen. I’d compared it to Tuslan’s actual heartbeat, and I knew they were in synch. “Or an ocean. Tendira’s magic is steady, and powerful, but wrestling it is like wrestling a wave. Pretty much impossible. Even if you have some kind of board, all you can do is follow the waves. Manipulating them is really tough.”

Everyone looked thoughtful. “What if you had some kind of container? Like if you used your own magic to make a bowl of some kind?” Paik checked.

It was an interesting thought. “It might work.” I glanced around. “The rest of you, scoot back, though. Just in case.”

Ellery and Tomo scooted back a few feet, but it wasn’t far enough back to really make a difference. They were fast though; they could probably dodge if I needed them to. Which I probably wouldn’t. Hopefully.

I didn’t have a ton of energy left, but I gathered what I did have and improvised a thin bowl as large as my arms opened wide. My fingers met the grass, digging softly into the soft, planted dirt beneath it, and I focused on Tendira’s energy.

The world came to life around me as the magic became visible. My hold on my bowl-barrier wavered as Tendira’s power hit it. It drew back, like a wave, and then crashed into my own personal creation magic, like it was attacking me.

It snuffed out my magic and my energy with it in an instant, and I went down hard, gasping for air as I landed on my hands and knees.

“Beasts,” I panted, the world spinning.

“Her nose,” someone said. I felt a hand on my arm—a small hand, not Tuslan’s.

Tuslan’s energy flooded me, but it didn’t work as well as it had the last times. I barely managed to keep a hold on the barriers around my friends, and even then, was barely holding them by a thread.

The world started to spin, and I lowered my head to the ground, trying to take in deep breaths.

The voices were alarmed, and maybe a bit agitated, but I couldn’t try to talk to their owners. I was focusing on just trying to breathe.

It wasn’t long before strong arms engulfed me, my favorite voice murmuring in my ear and stroking my back, telling me that I was alright and that everything was going to be okay.

Ten minutes or more must’ve passed before I could finally sit up and look at Tuslan’s eyes. His expression was soft, but there was rawness behind it that I hadn’t really seen before.

I reached for his emotions, and found at the forefront, relief and fear. They were almost equal.

We didn’t speak, but his eyes... they told me everything I needed to know.

Tuslan was used to being in control, keeping people safe, and protecting his pack. Now, I was his pack too—and there wasn’t really anything he could do to protect me from what I was

dealing with, other than be there for me. Which was a hell of a lot, but I knew that to him, it wasn't enough. If I were the one watching him deal with this, it probably wouldn't be enough for me either.

“Tendira’s magic attacked my magic. That might be the cause of the nosebleeds; I think the two magics are incompatible somehow. I don’t know why,” I admitted, wiping under my nose.

There was no blood there; Tuslan must’ve burned it away when he undoubtedly tried to heal me. I hadn’t noticed it, but I hadn’t been all that conscious anyway.

“You’ll have to release all of your barriers before you try to work with the creation magic, then,” he said. “That should’ve been in the Shifter Queen’s book.”

“A lot of things should’ve been in her book,” I said with a sigh, and then turned to look at the others with us.

I found that all of them had come outside, and were just watching us.

Waiting? Making sure I was okay? Studying our relationship? I didn’t know.

“Hey, guys,” I gave them a little wave.

“Well, that was terrifying.” Paik stood up, brushing grass off the back of his pants. “No offense, Mesa, but I’m glad I don’t have a human mate. Talk about stressful, whew.” He shook his head.

“Here.” Keena tossed me a Round. Tuslan caught it before I could reach for it, and he handed it to me. “Alyx and I are going to make lunch and pretend this didn’t happen, if you want in. Ellery’s coming too.” Her hand latched onto Ellery’s wrist, and the shifter shrugged.

“I’ll help,” Dovu said, taking a step toward Alyx.

“No,” Ellery, Alyx, and Keena said at the same time.

He halted, glancing between the three of us.

“I need a report from you on the Fringe’s recent movements,” Tuslan said smoothly, gesturing Dovu toward Paik’s place, where all the guys seemed to be gathering again. He squeezed my hand lightly, and sent me a tiny bit more of his energy. He had to be nearly tapped out.

Dovu’s lips flattened in frustration, but he went that way as his Alpha turned to me, putting his lips to my temple and murmuring, “No more creation magic until I’ve had time to rest a bit, please?”

“Unreasonable request,” I drawled. “I *so* wanted to feel like I was dying again before you got a nap in.”

He smirked, kissing me on the lips. His fingers curved possessively around my hip, dipping just below the waistband of my pants and brushing over the latest love burn he’d given me.

My body flushed, and I bit his lip. He chuckled, releasing me and striding off toward the house.

I found the girls all standing on the porch, watching me with their own little smirks.



20

“Don’t even start with me,” I warned as I passed them, stepping into Alyx’s house. “I found Alyx trying to re-kill the guy she’s still in love with earlier, so I better not be the one getting a lecture here.”

“Your mate is the one who kept him alive without telling any of us,” Alyx shot back. “And he lied to me, so—”

“So we’re not talking about men, or their dicks, or assholes, or any other parts of them,” Keena interrupted. “Unless Mesa wants to give us more details about how Tuslan marks you, because beasts, that sounded—”

“Keena,” Alyx cut her off, handing me a glass of water and commanding me to sit down and drink.

I sat down and drank.

Keena restarted. “Fine. No guy talk. We’re talking about food, because we’re all hungry for human food.”

I nearly snorted.

Was that what we were *hungry* for?

“I think Keena wants to get all cozy with a nice bowl of *tomato soup*,” Ellery suggested.

I laughed so hard that water came back up through my nose, and then we were all laughing really damn hard about that too.

“I may have been forced to reconsider my hatred for tomato soup during the weeks we spent savage,” Keena finally admitted, when we’d somewhat stopped laughing. “It’s not so bad. I did used to like it.” She flashed Ellery a devious grin. “And I think you find yourself falling in love with a little plate of Paik.” She feigned clearing her throat. “Sorry, I meant *cake*.”

More laughter followed.

“Every woman loves *cake*,” Ellery countered. “Yet I find myself realizing there’s more to it than just a few layers of moist goodness and sugary frosting.”

“Don’t judge a cake by its cover,” Alyx agreed.

“And what about a dove?” Ellery challenged her.

I bit back another laugh.

“We don’t even have doves in Tendira,” Alyx protested.

“Which makes them a delicacy,” Keena agreed. “Dove wings. Mmm.”

I snorted.

“Fine. Doves are... complicated. Too complicated. They taste good, up until they tear up your throat with those sharp little bones and then you can never breathe properly again, let alone speak or swallow.”

Yikes.

“On the plus side, at least Mesa is enjoying her *lamb*,” Keena changed the subject.

I laughed way too hard, once again. “Lamb? That’s what we’re going with? One of those fuzzy, baby sheep on the human continent? Why yes, I do love snuggling my fluffy little pet.”

“Well in this conversation, you’re supposed to be eating the fluffy little pet,” Keena pointed out.

I made a face. “Sad.”

“You’re the most human-like twelve-form I’ve ever met,” she declared.

We all exchanged grins, snorts, and rolled eyes.

The conversation went back to Dovu as we started cooking. Well, as *Alyx* started cooking. They made me stay seated and drink water, and Keena stirred something, while Ellery was tasked with finding snacks to force-feed me like I was a toddler.

“Did you know he was alive?” Alyx asked Keena.

“What? No, of course not. I’d have told you. I’m really not that great at keeping secrets, which all of you already know.”

Yeah, we knew.

“Do you think Paik and Tomo knew, though? Why did Tuslan keep it from me?” Alyx pressed.

Keena shrugged “Paik seemed pretty damn shocked to me, but Tomo didn’t. I don’t really know, though. But as far as why Tuslan kept it from you... you guys fell in love pretty fast, and then you kind of lost it after he died. Err, after we thought he died. Maybe Tuslan planned on telling you, but you kept saying you wished you could kill Dovu again, and it was legitimately almost three years before you even looked like you were alive again.”

“I felt so terrible,” she said, shaking her head and staring at the stove as she tossed ingredients into a massive pot without looking down. “I wanted to kill him again, but I also missed him, and I felt like I’d just lost the only thing I ever really loved, and... beasts, I *was* a mess.”

“He still should’ve told you,” I said. “I know it’s not really my place, but if I’d been there, I would’ve made sure he did. He probably feels bad about not telling you, now that he can better imagine what you must’ve been going through.” Reaching for our connection, I focused on his heartbeat and then his emotions.

He was feeling a lot of things. Mostly, he was worried about me. But there was enough guilt that I knew couldn’t be about me—and I knew it was for what he’d done to Alyx. But back then, he hadn’t really understood love. He was the jaded Blood Alpha, which he still was, but now he was the jaded Blood Alpha who loved me and knew I loved him. And being loved fully changed the way people thought.

I knew, because it had significantly changed my mind and outlook.

“Yeah, he definitely feels bad.” Obviously I wasn’t going to go spilling all his emotions to them, but they were our closest friends. They may as well have been our family. If we couldn’t trust them with the truth behind some of our emotions, who could we trust?

“I can’t believe you can feel each other’s emotions through your lalidro,” Keena said, shaking her head. “I could never do that even when it was at its biggest.”

“You never really accepted it,” Alyx reminded her. “But I couldn’t feel Dovu’s either. Maybe he hadn’t really accepted it.”

“He stood there and took it while you tried to kill him for a second time, Alyx. I’d say he accepted it,” I pointed out.

“I don’t know. I’m not sure what parts of our relationship were real or fake. Was it all some joke? Or was he genuine the whole time? All I have is unanswered questions.”

“And you burned his stuff,” Ellery pointed out.

“Most of it was my stuff, either given to me by him or stuff that reminded me of him. But yeah, I burned it.” She sighed. “Maybe I was too hasty when I burned it.”

I cut her off. “You weren’t too hasty. Even if Tuslan knew he was lying the whole time, you didn’t. And Dovu chose not to share that part of himself with you. That was his choice.”

“Every single day since I killed him—or thought I killed him—I looked at myself in the mirror and wondered if I did the right thing. He was opening up to me, trying to clear the air. What if I should’ve heard him out more? What if I didn’t listen well enough? What if I—”

“You can drown yourself in what-if’s, Alyx. It’s not worth it,” Keena said. “You know that as well as I do.”

“I know, but what I’m trying to say, is that what I did never sat well with me. But despite that, when I saw him, I just... attacked. Even in my savage form. What does that say about me?”

“That I hurt you, and you didn’t see it coming,” a male voice said in the doorway.

All of us spun to look at him. Dovu, standing at the door, his arms hanging uncomfortably at his sides while his fists were clenched. He was a Lava man, and though I didn’t know his age, he was high enough in the pack to be trusted to spy. And, from what Tuslan had said, he hadn’t abandoned the pack all that long ago compared to the other Lead Wolves.

He continued, “I should’ve expected you to react that way. I wanted to tell you the first time I kissed you, but I told myself that if I waited, if I just gave you time, then when I finally told you, it wouldn’t be a big deal. I should’ve expected you to attack me, Alyx. If I had, we wouldn’t have been in this position.”

He gestured between them, and I thought his expression bordered on desperate. “I knew you didn’t want to see me, and I was trying to respect that by staying away. But now that I’m here, and I’m seeing you, and remembering everything even more than I already do, and...”

He took a deep, albeit slightly shaky breath in. “Can we just... talk? We could go for a walk, or—”

“No walks while Mesa’s got us on her strings,” Keena cut in.

He glanced at her, and then back at Alyx.

Alyx looked hesitate, but also... she looked a little hopeful. And I sure as hell wasn’t going to be the reason that hopefulness disappeared.

“Beasts, I’m feeling lightheaded again,” I blurted, standing up and flinging my arms out to the sides. “Keena, Ellery, carry me to my man.”

Keena snorted, but she grabbed one side of me and Ellery grabbed the other, with a hint of a grin of her own.

“We’ll be back for food in twenty minutes,” Keena called over her shoulder as we left.

We joined the men in Paik’s house. The walls were a soft, warm white color and the floors a light wood. The decorations were sparse, but it didn’t feel bare. I shouldn’t have been surprised by the simple but homey way it was decorated, or the fact that it smelled kind of nice, but I was. I’d never really been in a man’s house before though, unless you counted Tuslan’s tower. Which was a house, but also a lair, so it wasn’t quite the same.

I started to get excited about seeing Tuslan’s house. Uncovering more bits and pieces about the ocean of a man was becoming kind of an addiction for me, and luckily, it was one I’d never have to worry about kicking.

When twenty minutes had passed, Dovu and Alyx came walking into the house. He carried the gigantic pot that had to weigh an assload, and she carried a few bowls and plates of other things, stacked together. They set everything on the table, and though there weren't enough chairs for everyone, we all grabbed bowls and plates.

A few of us sat, the rest of us stood leaned up against the walls or cabinets, and we ate.

For the most part, I just listened to the group and watched them interact. Though I felt like I was a part of them, I still didn't really understand how they had all interacted and functioned before I was there.

Paik led the conversation, and Keena kept it going. They were talking about a fight with another pack while they were savage, and Tuslan and I had obviously missed it, but they made it sound like some sort of game rather than an actual fight.

Dovu didn't say much, and Tuslan only remarked when someone else said something to him. But I was sitting on his lap, while his fingers moved idly over my hip, and I could feel how calm and happy he was.

Beasts, I loved being connected to him the way I was.

We ate until everything was gone, and until my eyes were trying to close themselves.

“Just let us go savage for a bit,” Keena said, waving her arm like it was nothing. “Get some sleep, and try again. It's not like we're suffering.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but ended up yawning instead.

“Get cozy. She’ll probably sleep through an entire day again,” Tuslan told everyone, standing up and pulling me with him.

“Was that an insult?” I asked him, narrowing my eyes.

He scooped me up, flashing me a teasing smirk as he carried me out of the room. “Of course not. If you wake up early, I’ll tire you back out so you sleep longer.”

Laughter echoed behind us, and I flipped them all the finger before releasing the hold on my barriers.

Tuslan held the door open before stepping outside, and a bunch of wolves bounded out.

“You’re a good Alpha,” I told him, all teasing aside.

“I do my best.”

I knew he did. It was like he said; he’d learned to do things as close to perfectly as possible since he was young.

But something told me that he didn’t do his Alpha stuff just because he felt like he had to; he did it because he cared.

And somehow, that care had extended to me.

I didn’t really understand why, but I sure as hell appreciated it.



21

I felt lighter without all those barriers weighing on me, but I felt a bit bad for letting my friends go savage again.

Then again, the only ones who had seemed uncomfortable while savage were Alyx and Dovu, and they seemed to have at least acknowledged their issues and decided to stop fighting about it.

Tuslan opened the door to his house.

“If the tower’s your lair and the cave is your hoard, what’s this?” I asked him.

“My den.” His nose tickled the side of my neck for a moment as he stepped inside, flipping the lights on.

The lighting was soft and laid-back, and my eyes slid over the space.

Its layout was the same as my house; a nice-sized open area with a bed, a closet built into one of the walls, and a bathroom built into another. But his bed was much bigger, and put up against a different wall, and there was a kitchen along the wall opposite the bed. The way everything was arranged, it didn’t feel any smaller than my house, despite the addition of the kitchen.

The floors were a dark brown tile, the walls a white that borderlined on gray, and the furniture was all done in dark neutrals. It wasn't ornate or overdone, but gave off an elegant vibe that all of Tuslan's homes seemed to possess.

"I didn't know you were a bear," I remarked, bringing us back to the "den" comment.

"Who knows what I'll be when you've embraced your magic fully," he murmured.

I liked the way he talked about us mating, as if it was inevitable.

Beasts, I hoped it really was.

He carried me to the bathroom, past a bookshelf that mostly held books I recognized and had already read. "How old's the kitchen?" I checked.

"I had it installed the day after my lalidro appeared." He set me on the bathroom counter before he headed over the tub and turned it on. Another set of my shower products were already gathered on one side of the tub.

I stripped my bandeau off, slipping off the counter so I could strip the rest of the way too. Tuslan's fingers curved around my hips as he dragged my bare body to his, taking my lips in an achingly-sweet kiss.

"I'm going to go grab your things," he murmured to me. "No sleeping in the tub."

He helped me into the water—because he wanted to, not because I couldn't climb into a tub myself—before leaving.

The front door closed behind him, loud enough that I could hear it, and my lips curved up in a smile as I settled into the bathtub.

It had been a good day, despite nearly getting myself killed by Tendira's apparently-fickle magic.

Tomorrow would be better, too.

Tuslan came back a few minutes later as I was drying off, and walked into the bathroom with a very familiar silky black robe.

“Is that a new robe?” I teased him, flashing him a smile.

He mirrored my expression. “It may as well be. Its owner is a beautiful, stubborn beast who refused to wear it.”

I laughed as I slipped my arms into the smooth fabric. “She sounds lovely.”

“Oh, she is.” His lips met my forehead, and then his fingers tangled in my damp, dripping waves as he tilted my head to the side so he could kiss my neck and then my shoulder. “Let's get you to bed,” he murmured against my skin.

Despite his desire, thick against my ass and within the bond in my abdomen, he towed me to bed and settled in with me without trying to start anything.

“You don't want to have sex?” I whispered.

“I always want to have sex. But you’re tired,” he murmured.

“You can be quick.” I caught one of his fingers, lifting it off my waist and dragging it down between my thighs. He was hesitant—and I didn’t know why. “I can always get in the mood, Red. Just takes a little encouraging.”

I brushed his hand over my sensitive skin, though the robe still separated us.

“Do you want to, though?”

“Yes.”

His hand tucked both of ours between my legs, and he brushed his fingers over me before slipping his hand over mine.

“Show me,” he murmured.

My body throbbed at the words.

My fingers slid over my core, and I inhaled sharply as his hand wrapped around my upper thigh, tugging my leg up and to the side just enough to give me better access.

“How does that feel?” he murmured to me, teeth skimming the side of my throat.

“It would feel better if you were between my thighs too,” I breathed, even as my heart pounded rapidly in my chest.

His pelvis unglued from my ass for a moment, and when it returned, he was bare.

He tucked his erection between my legs, and I brushed my fingers over the underside of him before aligning him with me, my breathing growing rapid.

He grabbed my tits, fingers teasing my nipples, my back arched a bit, pushing him inside me just slightly.

“You need more time, Blue,” he murmured, his other hand wedging between us and finding the little love burns he’d left just above my ass.

“Use your fire,” I panted. “I don’t want to wait.”

His flames kicked in, and bliss surged within me as I arched again, pushing him further into me.

A soft growl rumbled his chest, and he lifted my thigh more, giving him better access to me as he slid in deeper. His flames grew hotter, and heavier, pushing me over the edge.

I shattered with a gasp, my body clenching around him.

His teeth sank into my shoulder as the orgasm ended; he knew what he was doing. The bite dragged out the pleasure, wringing me out so well the damn world seemed to spin.

“Give me your magic,” he growled into my skin. “Hard.”

I focused on my power, making it move faster. He snarled as he came, his hips thrusting inside me as his flames continued to

stroke my skin.

When he stopped pulsing within me, his hands moved lazily over my arms, tits, and stomach. The silk of the robe brushed with him, and my body tensed a bit with the soft, seductive touch.

“That doesn’t feel like satisfaction,” he murmured into my neck.

“Not yet,” I murmured. “You’ve spoiled me too much.”

He tsked. “Impossible.”

He rolled me to my stomach, his cock hardening inside me again already. He was huge, and I was not, so the position got uncomfortable fast if he didn’t have his flames turned up all the way.

“When you’ve shifted,” he said, his voice low and somehow even silkier than the robe around me. “My venom will numb you to any pain caused by the differences in our size, and make you crave me the way I crave you.” His teeth skidded over my shoulder, and then my neck again. “You’ll beg me to bite you.”

“Is that so?” My breathing was quick as his hand squeezed my tit and caught fire. One of my breasts always seemed to be burned, at that point, and I couldn’t say I minded it.

“Oh, yes.” The silk of his voice grew deeper as he slid slowly, shallowly inside me. “And when you bite me back, you’ll understand the pure, animalistic satisfaction of knowing that I belong to you, and you alone. Mate.”

“Sounds hot,” I panted.

One of his hands began to work my core while the other played with the love burn and my nipple, and beasts, the pleasure built quickly.

“It’ll be otherworldly.” His lips sucked softly on my neck, and I cried out. He paused for a moment before I could crest, before the pleasure could break within me.

“Red,” I groaned into the pillow, starting to feel a bit desperate as he held us both in place, waiting for me to slip away from the edge. He liked it when I screamed, but I had no control over it—it just happened sometimes. When he teased me like this, it happened more frequently.

“Give me your magic, Leviathan,” he growled back.

I threw it at him.

“Harder.”

I made it bigger, hotter, and *felt* how good it felt to him through the bond. I didn’t know why he liked it so much, but I liked that he did.

He started to move again, to touch me. My breathing picked up again, my body nearing the edge. I was a puppet and he held the damn strings, and I didn’t even care.

As my body began to clench again, he stopped abruptly once more. His fingers were tight on my breast, and I felt how difficult it was for him to stop, to hold back.

“Just let me finish,” I panted, my mind spinning.

“Not yet.” His voice was rough, his breathing as ragged as mine.

After a moment so tense it was almost painful, he finally picked up the pace again, dragging us both back to the edge of reality and bliss.

“Tuslan,” I cried out in frustration when he stopped again.

“Mesa,” his voice was strained as he held me in place, throbbing inside me.

I wasn't the only one being tortured.

“More magic,” he hissed, when my focus on it faltered.

I pushed it toward him so roughly, that I felt something within me click into place.

Fire engulfed us both, and I screamed as pleasure tore through me. Tuslan slammed in and out of me, his expression wild again. The fire grew bigger and brighter as the waves of pleasure rolled through me, hot and heavy and needy and delicious.

We collapsed in each other's arms a minute later, the flames dying down as we panted together. Tuslan rolled so I was on top of him, his hand brushing hair away from my face. It was dry, suddenly—a perk to the flames, I guess.

“That was my fire,” I murmured.

His hand cupped the side of my face, tilting me just slightly so our eyes could meet. “It was *incredible*, Mesa.” He stared into my eyes for a moment. “Can you do it again?”

I closed my eyes, trying to find the magic. It didn’t roll over my skin the way my creation magic did; it rested in the center of my chest, where my many possible forms sat.

Pushing it out to my hands, to my skin, I felt the fire blossom to life. This time, it didn’t feel like anything specific—it just looked like fire, and danced over my skin.

Tuslan’s body went slack beneath mine. My eyes dipped to his face, and I found him wearing an expression I recognized well.

My lips curved upward when I tapped into his emotions and found him feeling the exact same numb, blissful peace his flames caused me.

Damn, I really was a phoenix.

I tried to withdraw the magic, but for some reason, I couldn’t manage to get it to shrink.

A frown settled on my face.

“Sleep,” Tuslan murmured to me, his hand moving barely an inch on my back as he tried to comfort me, while the thick peace of my fire relaxed him supernaturally. “We’ll figure it out when you’ve rested.”

That was easy to say while he was high on my fire, but I knew he'd probably change his mind with a little distance.

I tried to slip out of his arms, but they tightened around me.

I tugged, and wrestled, but he didn't budge.

"Red, I need to pee," I lied.

"Liar," he mumbled, but finally moved his arms off me.

I rolled out of bed, hurrying to the bathroom before he could chase me for more of a high or something. From experience, I knew he would be dazed for a few seconds after I left—hell, maybe longer. He had multiple centuries' worth of stress; I only had twentyish years' worth.

Leaning over the counter, I stared at myself in the mirror. Flames danced up my skin, twisting and merging with the barrier running over me as well. The magics seemed compatible, at least—and that was a huge improvement over the near-death experience I had earlier with my other two magics.

I felt Tuslan's guilt like a rock in my stomach. "I'm not mad," I called out to him. "It's like a drug, huh?"

"Yeah, it is. Caught me off guard," he admitted, on the other side of the door. His guilt hadn't gone anywhere.

"Stop being mad at yourself; it's just part of being a phoenix. Which apparently, I am. Any idea how to turn it off?" I checked.

"I can control it with a thought," he said.

Well, that didn't help.

I'd pushed it out to my skin to catch myself on fire; maybe I could reverse it?

I reached to the place all my forms were gathered, and tried to tug the magic back. It worked at first—and then backfired.

The world seemed to contort, and my stomach flipped.

The door flew open, and Tuslan grabbed me around the waist, hauling me out of the house so fast everything blurred around me.

I groaned, and my body seemed to fold inward.

“Don't fight it,” Tuslan said, his voice silky. “The fire within you—let it consume you.”

I didn't know what he was talking about... until I did. It wasn't hot, but the magic was so vibrant, and flowed so rapidly, it did burn.

I let it run over me, let it swallow me, until it engulfed me entirely.

Tuslan's arm tilted backward, and then he launched me into the air like I was a rock instead of a damned living *thing*.

A scream left my throat, but it didn't sound like a scream—it sounded like a squawk.

My arms flung around wildly until they caught my eyes, and I saw not arms, but wings.

Holy shit, I was a phoenix.

A shifter.

A laugh spluttered from me, and I stopped swinging my arms. The air caught on them, and I remembered that I was flying—well, falling.

I remembered what Tuslan had told me though—that flying had felt right. Natural.

So I ignored the instinct to freak out, and let my new body take the wheel.

The wind tugged awkwardly on my wings, and they adjusted until they felt right. My trajectory changed, and suddenly I was gliding, instead of falling, and moving along the horizon instead of crashing through it.

Another laugh escaped me.

Beasts, this was wild.

My eyes caught on another bird, the same as me, soaring toward me.

Tuslan.

He was higher than me; I wanted to move up toward him.

My wings flapped together once, a smooth motion that somehow propelled me upward.

Another flap of my wings carried me up further, and another further until I was at Tuslan's side.

His head tilted back, and his pride coursed through the lalidro on our bellies as he loosed a loud cry.

I echoed the noise, though mine was admittedly less terrifying and more chicken-like.

We flew together until I was so exhausted I could barely move, and then we went back to his house and crashed.



22

“Hey, Blue,” he murmured, his hands moving lazily over my stomach.

My eyes opened, and he stilled.

“What?” I whispered, feeling his surprise.

“Your eyes.”

I frowned, closing them. “What’s wrong with them?”

“Nothing. They’re just moving, now.”

I slipped out of bed, striding toward the bathroom. My body ached so badly that every motion hurt, but Tuslan caught up to me as I reached the mirror, and he put a hand on my hip.

His fire burned away my pain in the blink of an eye, healing whatever inside me was causing my soreness.

My lips parted when I saw my eyes.

The change within them was slight, just the normal blue to a slightly-lighter one. But change was change—and there was no

questioning what it marked me as.

“Beasts, I really am a shifter.”

“Feel the urge to go furry yet?” Tuslan asked, resting his chin on my head as he settled behind me.

“No. And I definitely don’t want twelve forms,” I added.

He chuckled softly. “It doesn’t take much to balance them when you have multiples. The magic laces itself through you entirely. Using your fire is as good as shifting as far as balancing things goes, and it’s the same for the rest of it.”

I blinked, still utterly captivated by the way my eyes changed. The colors morphed and rolled with magic, and damn, it was awesome.

“Do you like them?” I asked.

“They’re you; of course I like them.”

I frowned. “That’s not much of an answer.”

His hands skimmed the curve of my hips. “Your eyes could be purple, and I’d love you the same. Or red, or green, or yellow, or gray... I don’t give a damn.”

“You call me ‘Blue’, though.”

“I nearly called you beautiful in the staircase, and stopped myself. Blue was the best I could do to cover for it.”

My lips parted. “Seriously?”

“Well I couldn’t just give away my hand without learning a bit about you first.” His fingers stroked my hip.

“You’re crazy,” I told him, shaking my head a bit, still stunned.

“It’s not like my interest was a secret. I sniffed your neck a handful of times.”

“I thought you were trying to get me to submit,” I said, mind moving fast.

He chuckled. “If I just wanted you to submit, I’d have knocked you out and been done with it.”

Yeah, that did fit.

“So you weren’t trying to insult me by nicknaming me after the color of my eyes,” I finally said.

“Nope. But I didn’t mind the way it riled you up when you thought I was.”

I elbowed him in the gut, making him grin at me in the mirror.

We both got dressed, and then I had to attempt to tuck all of my magic away as we headed out to find our friends.

With my barrier magic out of the way, channeling Tendira's power was much easier. I started with Paik again, since he'd volunteered, and tried to take the diamonte's advice.

Rather than trying to make a net to drag Paik's power toward the mountain, I simply reached into the earth and connected Paik to the land.

When his magic was in contact with Tendira, both powers seemed to brighten.

I brought to mind the energy I'd felt at Soul Mountain, trying to guide my magic there. And when I found it, I didn't try to move it—I just followed the line of its magic all the way back to me and Paik.

Connecting him to it like that was much, much easier.

I wrapped him in the barrier that reconnected all of his forms, and released Tendira slowly before opening my eyes.

I found Paik grinning at me like a proud father.

“You didn't even kill me,” he said.

I scowled. “I was never going to kill you.”

The lift of his eyebrow told me he didn't believe me.

Suddenly, he sniffed the air and frowned. “You smell different.”

I sniffed myself, but didn't smell anything.

“Did you shift?” he asked. “You don’t smell bad, but I don’t know what else would change your scent so much.”

“I shifted,” I admitted.

He whistled. “Shifted for the first time, and figured out how to work this. Damn, Leviathan.”

“Phoenix, actually.” I fluffed my hair.

“For now.” Tuslan tugged on the hair I’d fluffed. “Do you think you can replicate this with the others?”

“Yes?”

Both men gave me confused looks.

“Theoretically, yes,” I revised my statement. “I’ll try.”

Everyone else was wandering around in their shifter forms, so they were all close enough that I thought I could probably still do what I wanted.

My magic sought out theirs, one-by-one. It took a little more effort to connect it to Tendira’s magic than I expected, but I managed. When their magic connected to the land’s, it wasn’t overly difficult to link them back to the pulsing power that was Soul Mountain and use its magic to tie all of their forms back together.

It felt like I’d just climbed a mountain when I released my hold on Tendira’s magic. Everyone greeted one another again

now that they were permanently sane, while I struggled to catch my breath.

Tuslan's arm draped over my shoulder, holding me to him as he told everyone about our midnight flight—minus the sex that had inspired it—the pride in his voice thick and tangible.

It felt good to have him proud of me; to have him believe in me. I'd been the only one believing in myself for far too long.

“So how long do you think it'll be before you can do this to the rest of Tendira?” Alyx asked, gesturing to the group of shifters.

Her eyes flicked to Dovu, and I figured she wanted to know how long she'd have to wait before he left. Though, I hadn't talked to her about their conversation before, or how it had gone.

“I don't know. I'll have to test it out on the capitol to get a better idea.” I shrugged. “It's pretty tiring, but I'm ready to get all of this over-with.”

“I can imagine.” Alyx fiddled with her bangs.

“What happens when this is done?” Ellery wondered.

“We take as many ex-Royal Pack members as want to join us. Mesa settles back in here, with us, and life resumes as usual,” Tuslan put the plan out quickly and efficiently as always.

“We should need to find the infant Queen, though,” Ellery countered.

“We need to rescue the original Queen, actually,” I said. “She mentioned the line of Queens being broken, so I don’t know whether or not there is an infant Queen. But even if there is, her mother will protect her until they get her to me. The other Queen doesn’t have that.”

“The Tidals have her?” Tomo asked.

I confirmed it.

“A few of us should go scope out the Tidals while you work on the city,” Keena remarked. “What do you say, Alpha?”

She and everyone else looked at Tuslan.

His head bobbed. “Tomo will lead the group. No fighting unless necessary; if they’re not savage, we don’t want them to know we aren’t either.”

“Why wouldn’t they be savage?” Dovu spoke up. He was a bit late to the Queen-magic party, so I felt bad that he was excluded a bit. Though, he had sort of betrayed the pack. But I hadn’t been around for that, which made it harder to judge him for it.

“The original Shifter Queen is way more powerful than I am. I’m sure she could tether them to her instead of to me, and now that I know they have her, I’m starting to think that their whole idea that the “pillar must fall” was just a way to take out the rest of the shifters so they could sort of conquer Tendira. They can’t really have wanted to be savage; if they did, they probably would’ve just asked me. Especially after we killed their Alpha.”

Thinking about that brought up memories I didn’t want to relive. I guess even the shifter version of me wasn’t immune to

the pain and discomfort that accompanied violence. Maybe it was something I'd just have to learn to be okay with.

But I hoped I wouldn't. I hoped in that way, I could always remain human.

"We'll see what we can find out," Tomo agreed. His gaze slid over the group. "Axe, Alyx, and Ellery?"

The girls all nodded.

Damn, I wished I could join their spy mission. But obviously, that wasn't going to happen. I'd be a damn good spy since I could use my barrier magic to hide myself and others, but I was needed in the capitol.

Paik and Dovu didn't look thrilled about being excluded, but neither argued.

Tuslan told the men, "I need you two flying over our land, checking to make sure that there aren't any Tidal wolves sneaking around our land again. I wouldn't put it past them to try to kill us while they think we're savage."

They looked less bummed, then, and agreed. We all parted ways, and Tuslan took my hand as we headed deeper into the capitol.

We stopped when we reached what he said was the city's center. I recognized Reta's shop there, and a bit of longing weighed my heart down. I missed seeing the city's movement, and the people there that I cared about. Even my acquaintances mattered to me; when I'd been living in the Blood Pack as Mesa-the-weak, it had been the first time I was really free to

meet people without my crown or title influencing them. So many people had liked me for me, and it had been so nice.

My mind went back to the crown in my castle as we walked, and then to the chained Queen.

If she wanted her crown back, would I stop her?

My answer was patchy, at best, but I did understand my feelings.

I'd been born a Human Queen, but that wasn't who I was. I was a shifter, a friend. Soon, I'd be a mate, and the Alpha's closest advisor. Maybe someday, I'd even be a mom. Did I really want to be Queen on top of that?

I forced myself to admit that no, I did not.

Freedom and adventure had always appealed to me, and I could have that with Tuslan. But not so much with a crown.

Though, if Tendira absolutely needed a Queen, I would be that. If it was a role only I was willing to fill, I'd fill it.

But if there was an alternative... well, than I'd leave my gorgeous crown sitting in my closet in the castle that had been my childhood prison.

I'd embrace my role as mate to the greatest Alpha who'd ever lived, and I'd go back to serving food, and I'd be free.

Free as a bird; a fire-bird.

In the center of the city, I kneeled down on a patch of grass. My fingers dug into the packed soil and roots, and I extended my mind toward Tendira's magic.

Her power charged the air, and I tried to push it outward, in an attempt to connect it to the shifters' energies the way I'd connected it to my friends'.

At first I didn't find anything, but as I altered the way I searched; I began to find life forces big and small.

I let out a slow breath, spreading the range of my magic as far as it could possibly go. I could tell I'd reached the edge of the city when there was a gap around the entire area I'd collected, without any more energies within it.

Gasping for breath with the effort of it, I latched them all together before channeling Soul Mountain.

A soft flow of energy filled me as Tuslan shared his power with me through our bond, and my body was charged enough to finish connecting the shifters to Soul Mountain, and then use that connection to set up the magic that gave them access to all of their forms once again.

Releasing the magic, I collapsed to the ground in a groaning heap of exhaustion.

"You did good, Blue," Tuslan purred, his hand tracing comforting circles on my back.

"Thanks," I panted.

I could hear noise around us—people calling each other’s names, yelling for each other, laughing, probably hugging, too.

“Alpha,” a female exclaimed. “It’s so good to see you. Where have you been? How have you been?”

My guard went up, even from where I’d collapsed on the floor.

Damn women, too smart not to realize that Tuslan was an ideal man.

“Ulah,” Tuslan greeted her, his voice much flatter than usual. “I’m taking care of my mate right now. Leave.”

Beasts, really?

I mean, yeah, the comment gave me all kind of bitchy warm-fuzzies, but it was an asshole of a thing to say.

“Oh. Well, your lalidro isn’t golden. I assumed it was still the accidental marking from healing that one shifter, and—”

I pulled myself up to a sitting position. As much as I wanted to sass the woman and lay claim to my mate, I wasn’t as much of a bitch as my warm and fuzzy feelings.

“Hi, I’m Mesa.” I waved at her, pasting a smile on my probably-pale face, fighting another bout of dizziness. “The Shifter Queen. Tuslan and I are going to complete the Amra as soon as I’ve re-anchored all of the shifters to their humanity.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “I’ve heard your name, but I didn’t know you were the Shifter Queen.”

“Yeah, it was a secret for the first few months I was here.” A yawn split my lips, stretching my whole damn face. “Beasts, this was exhausting. Sorry.”

“No, if you’re the one who got us back into human form, I should be thanking you,” Ulah said quickly.

Tuslan’s agreement hit me like a brick in my abdomen, and I bit back a grin. “Don’t worry about it.” I glanced at Tuslan. “Should we fly home?”

Might as well give everyone something to talk about, right?”

“Definitely.” He lifted me to my feet, planted a scorching-hot kiss on my lips, and shifted.

“It was nice to meet you, Ulah.” I gave her a tired smile as Tuslan took off into the sky.

“You too,” she called out as I started to jog.

The instinct to follow Tuslan into the sky was enough to push me into my second-time shift, and my body changed with barely a thought.

My wings carried me up, and up, and up, until I was flying alongside Tuslan.



23

I slept the rest of the day, and woke up to Tuslan flipping palmcakes on the stove. The house smelled heavenly, even more heavenly than it should've, and I realized that my sense of smell had already gotten better.

We talked about the book I'd seen on Tuslan's nightstand while we ate. I liked hearing his thoughts about the dysfunctional fictional couple.

After we'd eaten, we cleaned up together and headed out to the next-nearest city. I was still a bit worn-out from the day before, but sleep had helped enough that I was sure I wouldn't have a problem replicating what I'd done with the capitol. Hopefully, I could do it two or three more times that day without crashing.

We flew there together—and it absolutely thrilled me that I didn't need to ride on Tuslan's back anymore. Not just because of the independence it brought me, but because I just really loved flying.

We landed in the center of the city. Like the capitol had been, it was a ghost-town. Thanks to Tuslan, I knew shifters would be camped out in their homes or in the forests surrounding their homes, but it was odd not to see anyone around.

I repeated what I'd done the day before. The city was smaller, but I wasn't so exhausted this time, so I pushed my magic out further. I managed to catch another two small towns in the magic before running out of juice, and then I tied them to Soul Mountain before falling on my face again and groaning into the dirt.

"Was it harder that time?" Tuslan asked, concern in his voice.

"I made it harder myself. Needed to reach more of the continent," I panted. "Got two extra towns in."

"Good." Pride replaced his concern. "Should we head home?"

"No. If you're okay to fly me somewhere else, I can take care of another city after a bit of rest." I finally lifted my head off the ground, meeting his beautiful dark eyes.

"Of course."

I filled him in on the directions of the two towns I'd found so he knew where not to take me, and we were off.

We made it through three more cities and caught three more towns in the process before I couldn't take anymore and Tuslan had to fly me back home. As much as I liked flying with my own new wings, it was more important to keep stretching my control over the magic than it was to fly myself.

I fell asleep before I even made it to the bed.

Over the next week, we made it through the rest of the Blood Pack's cities. My control grew bigger and better every day, though toward the end I had to stretch it over cities I'd already

anchored to keep strengthening my muscles as far as the power was concerned.

Tomo and the women who'd gone with him arrived back at the capitol around the same time we did on the day we finished anchoring the last Blood Pack shifters.

We stepped out of the meeting house to greet them, but my excitement died when I saw all four of their grimaces.

“Bad news?” Tuslan asked.

“We'd better grab Paik,” Alyx said.

Keena strode toward his house. “I've got it.”

Dovu was crashing there too. I'd tried to offer him my old house, which was technically *his* old house, but Tuslan said it still smelled like me—which meant he wasn't letting another man inside the building yet.

He had been moving the rest of my things over to his house though, and had started growling at me if I called it “his” instead of “ours”.

We all gathered in the building the Alpha and his Leads had always met in—the one with all the couches and books. I'd learned that they called it their meeting house, and used it so they didn't have to bring pack members into their actual homes when problems unavoidably rose.

Tuslan had been meeting with people out in front of our house at night since we'd been back, though—he'd informed me that he wasn't leaving me while I was sleeping and vulnerable.

It was a sweet, if overprotective, gesture. But that was just Tuslan's personality, and he kept the meetings quiet, so they never woke me up.

When everyone was gathered in the meeting house, with Tuslan holding me securely on his lap despite my half-hearted protests, they told us what they'd seen.

"Tidal never went savage," Tomo began, not bothering with bush-beating or time-wasting. "They've blown a path through the mountains with some kind of explosives, and they've already taken over the Valley Pack. Only the Valley capitol stands, and that's because it's far enough that they haven't reached it yet."

He continued, "We didn't see any sign of the other Queen or the new Tidal Alpha. The ex-Valley land nearest to their borders seems busier than any others, which leads us to believe it's their new capitol, but we don't have any solid evidence of that. Many Valley wolves are dead, and the ones that aren't dead have scattered through the mountains, headed to Lava or Pine."

"And what's the status on Pine?" Tuslan checked, his emotions dark and tumbling in my abdomen.

"The only creatures we saw there were savage shifters," Tomo lifted a shoulder.

"But given their connection with Jalvo, it's safe to assume that's where they're headed next." Tuslan's head bobbed, his fingers perched possessively on my hip.

"How do they have the numbers for this?" Paik wondered. "We don't have the people required for something like that, and

we're much bigger than they are.”

Keena shrugged. “They seem to have abandoned their pack’s land. Which is understandable, because that place was a shithole. You should see it—their houses were these tiny solid things that barely seemed to protect against the constant tsunamis hitting them.”

“They couldn’t have overpowered the Valley Pack without Mesa knocking everyone savage, though,” Tomo pointed out. “Which may be the real reason they’ve been so obsessed with taking out the Shifter Queen.”

“Better quality of life is pretty damn motivating,” Alyx agreed.

“But would they really target the Shifter Queen just for more land?” Ellery protested.

“They were trapped, with no other way out. A direct attack on Valley would’ve ended with their pack wiped out, like the last war nearly did. They knew we would all go after them; they’ve never had any true allies. A plot to kill the Shifter Queen was likely their only option,” Tomo explained.

“It was a good plan,” Tuslan admitted.

I lifted an eyebrow at him.

“From a tactical point of view,” he revised. “If I was in their position, it’s what I would’ve done.”

Maybe that should’ve hurt, but it didn’t. Tuslan was a good Alpha; he would do whatever it took to save his pack. And in

the grand scheme of things, mine and Cina's lives weren't really much compared to the lives of an entire pack. Particularly if you were part of said pack.

"Without another option, it's what anyone would've done," Alyx said.

"So what do we do?" I asked. "If the Tidal land isn't really inhabitable, we can't just force them to go back. And if they don't really have a pointless grudge against the Queens, we should be able to come to some kind of agreement with them."

"The pack's leadership needs to go," Tuslan disagreed. "Their plan may have been their only real option, but they still abducted the original Shifter Queen and enacted a plan that literally killed you. We can work out the land dispute, but the leaders have to pay."

The words elicited nods from around the room. Even from Dovu, who wasn't really a member of the team, and Ellery, who didn't always agree with the kill-first-question-later stance the Blood Pack had relied on for so long.

"All that's going to do is piss them off and alienate them from the rest of Tendira further," I argued.

"It's a fresh start," Keena countered. "The pack needs one of those if the rest of the Alphas are going to give them more land and let them live."

The words didn't sway me any, and I opened my mouth to say so, but Tuslan interrupted.

"We'll let everyone consider it for a few days before making any decisions," he said. I was the only one he needed to

persuade, and he knew it, but I figured he'd rather argue about it with me in private. "The next thing to discuss is which pack we want to work on anchoring now that ours is taken care of."

"*Do* we want to anchor the rest?" Keena countered. "Plenty of the packs are better-off in wolf form."

Anger flooded me.

Not anger with Keena—I knew she had her reasons for preferring the other packs in wolf form. And hell, they were probably valid reasons. But it pissed me off right and quick to hear them discuss a decision that was mine to make, and mine alone. I was the reason the shifters were trapped in their wolf forms; I wasn't going to be the reason they stayed that way. I'd seen the way Tuslan vanished, replaced with a simplified, baser version of the man I loved, and I wasn't going to trap anyone like that. No one deserved that.

"That's Mesa's decision, and no one else's," Tuslan said, without a damned hint of uncertainty. "The Queen works with us, but she doesn't serve us."

My anger dissipated, replaced by appreciation.

"I'm going to anchor all of them; no one deserves that fate. Look at how much it changed you two." I gestured to Keena and Tomo, who were sitting on the same couch for the first time ever since I'd met them. There was a foot or two between them, but they were sitting together, and that was something of a miracle.

Keena's face reddened. "It didn't *change* us."

I lifted an eyebrow at her. None of us believed that.

She heaved a sigh. “It forced me to see Tomo differently. That’s all. We’re not *together* again, and we never will be.”

There was a question hanging in the air after her words, though. I could feel it.

And there was an inky lalidro on her abdomen, looking bigger than it had been before she went savage.

“It changed things for everyone. Not necessarily in a bad way, but it’s not my place to make a decision like that. The original Shifter Queen is the only reason my death made everyone savage anyway; it’s my job to fix her shitty mistake. And I’m going to do it. You can help me decide which order to bring back the packs, but that’s all.”

There was a moment of silence, but it wasn’t an angry silence. It was sort of... respectful.

“Well, Rain is probably our closest ally,” Paik offered.

“But the Pine Pack is most at-risk right now,” Alyx remarked.

“If we want the Tidals wiped out, we need to bring back the Lavas. They won’t stand for the pack-takeover,” Tomo countered.

Ellery butted in. “Most of the Valley wolves headed for Pine, though. Some were going toward Royal, too.”

“Royal is Faction, now,” I said, almost absentmindedly as I tried to work through all of the points they made. “And Pine

was working with Tidal. If Jalvo doesn't have his mate back, I'm sure he'll keep giving their Alphas whatever they want."

"Sand and Fringe should be last-priority since they're the least-involved in everything that's going on," Alyx spoke again. "And Lava's really a wild-card. They could just as easily attack Fringe while they're down in an attempt to take more land instead of turning on Valley."

"No," Dovu jerked his head. "Lava's brutal, but if there's one thing they believe in, it's rules. The Tidal Pack members were put on their land for being shitty in the first place; taking more land without calling an Alpha council goes directly against every agreement the packs have made together. If we get Lava up, they'll take care of the Tidals."

"And start a war in the process," Alyx argued.

"You're both right," Tuslan said, cutting off the argument. "Lava's loyalty to the land agreements would ensure they attack the Tidals, but doing so would probably force a war because afterward, they would feel that the land was rightfully Lava's. I think we should start with Pine's capitol, and send a group of our people with Jalvo to Tidal to retrieve his mate as quietly as possible. From there, we could possibly take out the pack's leadership while Mesa revives the rest of Pine. What we do afterward should depend on what the Tidals do next, to minimize the blood that's shed."

It was hard to put the idea of slaughtering the Alpha and his or her Lead Wolves together with the idea of minimizing the bloodshed, but I guessed that was Tuslan and the Blood Pack's stance in a nutshell. Some people couldn't be allowed to live because of the danger they posed to others, and that was that.

When I put it like that, it was easier to accept the thought of wiping out the Tidals' leadership. But I still wasn't ready to agree with it.

Everyone around the room debated a bit more, but in the end, they seemed to agree that Tuslan's plan would be the best bet.

"What do you think?" Tuslan finally asked me.

I'd been listening, trying to get everyone's take on things, and hadn't voiced my own thoughts.

My shoulders lifted. "I'm still pretty new to the dynamics between the packs. I trust you guys to come up with the best plan."

His appreciation unfurled in my abdomen, and I flashed him a small smile. He traced my lips with his finger, and Keena cleared her throat.

"So, should we leave tomorrow?" she checked.

"Yes. Mesa needs to rest tonight," Tuslan's head bobbed.

I hated needing to rest, but he was right.

"Great." Keena stood. "Come on, ladies. We've got to get Mesa an Amra outfit, and I know exactly who we should talk to."

The other women stood, but Tuslan's reluctance to let me go was evident in his grip on my hips and through our connection, too.

“Come on, Alpha. She can’t mate with you without a proper outfit,” Keena complained.

“She owns plenty of gold,” Tuslan disagreed.

He’d made sure of that.

“I’ll be back soon,” I promised, kissing him on the cheek.

He released me, though his fingers brushed that burn below the waistband of my pants before he let me go. “Be safe,” he murmured.



24

Though we could've flown much quicker, we walked into the center of the town.

The women told me stories about their trip—Keena and Tomo had been flirting like mad, according to Alyx and Ellery, though Keena denied it outright and declared that she wouldn't sleep with Tomo again even if they were the last shifters in Tendira.

She said it with a grin, though, and we all knew what that meant.

“You'll be together by the end of the week,” Alyx declared.

“As if you haven't already decided to bone Dovu again,” Keena shot back.

Alyx straightened to her full height—damn tall—and lifted her chin. “If I want to sleep with Dovu, I'll sleep with Dovu. And if you judge me for it, I'll punch you.”

The rest of us grinned at her.

“Regretting our little bonfire, huh?” I teased.

“No. You were right; he deserved it. If he wants to be with me again, he’ll have to treat me a hell of a lot better than he did before.” She paused, and swallowed. “Though up until he told me the truth, he did treat me pretty damn good.”

Her eyes flooded a bit, and she flapped her hand in front of them. “Dammit, I didn’t want to cry. The whole thing is just... Beasts, I thought I’d killed him.”

I took one of her hands, and Ellery took the other. Keena took Ellery’s other hand, just so she could be a part of it.

“Hey. Whatever happens, you did what you felt was right,” Keena told her, her voice softer than it had been. “And that’s all anyone can do.”

The words struck a chord with me.

“In other news, I caught Ellery and Paik making plans to go flying together tonight,” Keena said, her expression going mischievous.

Ellery’s face went bright red, her pale skin not hiding her embarrassment one bit. “I’ve never flown with another wyvern before,” she admitted. “I’ve wanted to for a long time, so... I asked him.”

“Seriously?” My eyebrows lifted.

“I remember a certain comment about not being interested in a certain man because of certain body parts,” Alyx remarked.

Ellery’s face grew even redder. “I may also feel bad about that, and want a chance to apologize to him. I was... wrong.”

I whistled. "I've never heard you say that, in your entire life."

"In *your* entire life," Ellery pointed out.

I waved my hand, brushing it off, and she added, "And it doesn't happen often, but I *was* wrong. He's a good guy, whatever his reasons for everything he's done."

"You should ask him his reasons," Keena told her. "Really. It's probably not what you think."

I knew that was the truth.

"Maybe I will." She released Alyx's hand and slipped both her fists into her pockets. "So does our pack wear black, or gold?"

"Beats me." Keena shrugged. "Ask the Blood Queen over there."

My face warmed too. "I don't care what color people wear. The pack's color is already black; we may as well leave it so no one has to go out and get new clothes. Seems wasteful."

"Supporting you isn't wasteful," Alyx disagreed. "I saw a bunch of people wearing gold when we flew in."

My eyebrows lifted. "Really?"

I hadn't expected that, or been paying attention to it.

“Well, you *are* the reason we’re not wandering around as mindless wolves,” Keena pointed out. “Wearing gold isn’t much of a thank you, but it’s something.”

“It’s more than something,” I said, my throat constricting a bit. “It’s really sweet.”

We approached the busier part of the city, and found it much crazier than usual. People ran to and fro, in small groups and larger groups and everything in-between.

My friends and I stopped chatting when the city’s noise grew too loud to really hear each other well.

People stopped to wave and call out a “thank-you” to us as they passed. My eyes grew rounder as I saw more and more people wearing gold. Some wore all gold, some wore a mixture of black and gold, but only a few wore solid black.

The crowd parted for us as we headed toward Reta’s. We found her in her store, which was insanely-packed, full to the brim with shifters.

Greetings flew from around the room, and we sort of waved them off. None of us ladies were all that social when it came to massive groups of people, but it took a special kind of personality to be suited for that, anyway.

“There she is,” Reta declared, holding her arms out.

“Reta,” I smiled, walking into her arms and giving her a hug. Most shifters weren’t keen on unnecessary physical contact, but when a person already had a *laldro*, that changed.

She squeezed me tightly. “Beasts, I’m glad you’re alive.”

“Me too,” I flashed her a grin.

“You’ve sure changed my store. I can’t create gold clothing fast enough for these fiends now that you’ve opened the floodgates. The beasts above and below must’ve heard my silent cries for more colors. I would’ve been fine with anything but black, and you gave me gold. Gold!” She gestured for us to follow her out of the shop, calling over her shoulder, “I’m closed! Check in tomorrow!”

The smile she gave me told me she was thrilled with the new customers and their craziness.

“Where are we headed?” Keena checked, as we headed down the road.

“My studio, of course. Where else would I keep the Queen’s Amra outfit?”

That was a valid point, I guess, considering everything gold was in such high demand.

A few minutes later, we stepped into an elegant, small house with enormous windows. When I thought about it, I realized I’d never seen any monstrously-large houses. Maybe the Blood Pack didn’t build them, or if they did, they were past the outskirts of the city.

Reta gestured to a door off to the right, just inside the house. “In here.”

“You have a beautiful home,” Ellery remarked. It was simple, but tasteful and spacious, so I agreed.

“Much of my life is focused on beauty,” Reta said simply. “And I’ve found that beauty isn’t only in how something looks, but how it feels. An open home feels more beautiful than a cluttered one, just as a properly-fitted top feels more beautiful than an uncomfortable one.”

I was sure there was some kind of ancient wisdom to the words, but my mind went blank when I saw the clothing on the headless, body-shaped mannequin.

“I still have your measurements,” Reta continued. “But we’ll have to make sure it still fits. You were deathly skinny when I first met you.”

A week on a beach, starving, would do that to you.

“It’s stunning,” I finally said.

“I know.” Her lips curved up in a smirk.

She’d taken the classic golden Amra bandeau and pants or skirt, and transformed it.

Black lace overlaid the shimmering gold, the bandeau curving at the top with thin black sleeves that rested off the shoulder and in the middle of my arms. My typical pants had been replaced with a skirt made of gold silk, with more of the thin black lace spread strategically over the fabric, growing lighter until the black vanished, leaving the ends completely gold. It would flutter when I walked, catching the wind and my legs.

“Beasts,” Ellery breathed.

“You’re going to start a new fashion trend,” Alyx murmured.

“Oh, I know.” Reta gave me a wicked smile. “Why do you think I’m hoarding that?” She gestured to the rolling clothing racks that lined the wall, all loaded up with black and gold clothing. “I have to keep my business running somehow.”

“You don’t even get paid,” Keena pointed out.

“Sure I do. I’m paid in gratitude, and attention, and the Alpha let’s me pick through our city’s fabric order before any of the other seamsters or seamstresses. She looked between all four of us. I’ll grab the rest of your outfits, and you can try them on together. Do we have a date for the Amra yet?” She looked to the other girls instead of me.

“Tuslan’s getting there,” Alyx said vaguely.

That was suspicious.

“He’s already planning it?” I lifted an eyebrow.

“We’re sworn to secrecy. Don’t ask.” Keena plucked her pile of clothing out of Reta’s hands.

“You’re supposed to be loyal to me,” I complained.

Keena grinned. “We are. Loyal enough to know not to mess with your almost-mate when he starts planning shit. It’s not like you were going to plan anything. You’d probably just want to do

the ceremony in your house. Which I support, by the way, even if Tuslan doesn't."

I frowned. "He wanted to do it in the mountains."

"Guess he's changed his mind." Ellery shrugged.

"But—"

"We've already said too much," Alyx cut me off. "Put the damned gorgeous clothes on so we can drool over you."

I laughed, but followed her command.

I found Tuslan tucked under the blankets on our bed, reading a book, when I got home. His hair was messy and his eyes looked tired, but he gave me this heart-wrenching smile that made my whole body happy when I walked in and shut the door behind me.

"Well?" he asked.

"They told me all about your secret plans for our Amra," I lied, heading for the closet. I wanted to be free of my tight bandeau, and to collapse in that bed with him and snuggle until I fell asleep.

"No they didn't," he countered, remaining where he was as I slipped out of the closet, in just my panties, and went into the bathroom.

"Fine, they didn't. I didn't know you were planning something, though," I said as I slipped into my robe. Tying the

sash, I untucked my hair from within the clothing and grabbed a hair tie. Starting to put it up in a bun, I stopped halfway and considered it. Tuslan loved the way my messy waves clung to his skin in random places when we cuddled.

Tossing the hair tie to the counter, I let my hair fall around my shoulders and walked back into the bedroom. Tuslan's eyes darkened as they fixed on my body, moving over my skin.

"I was going to ask if you wanted to go for a swim," he remarked.

"It's almost dark outside." I gestured to the window, even though the curtain was closed.

"You're a shifter now."

I blinked at him, and my lips formed an O-shape when I realized that meant I would be able to see in the dark. "Let's go," I changed course, moving toward the door.

"Mesa," Tuslan's voice was a bit of a growl. I stopped before I reached the doorway, glancing over my shoulder at him in question. He was still in bed, exactly where he'd been, but his eyes were fixed on my ass. "You're practically naked."

Right.

"Skinny dipping?" I asked, flashing him a teasing grin.

His lips curved upward. "You'll have to let me carry you out so no one sees you."

“Deal.” I untied the sash on my robe, and he helped me out of it, tossing it to the bed as his arm wrapped around my waist.

My grin grew as he plucked me up off the ground, lifting me so my front met his. His arms wrapped around me, holding me to him, and he kissed me as he dragged the door open.

The world rushed around us as he ran. His speed always caught me off-guard, and I couldn’t imagine ever being *that* fast. But, if I let my shifter side have its way, I could be even faster.

We reached the beach ridiculously fast, and when Tuslan was satisfied that it was just as empty as always, he set me down and let his eyes rake over my skin. “Damn, woman.”

“I’ll beat you into the water,” I teased, dropping my panties and wading out into the ocean. The water should’ve felt cold to me, but it didn’t.

He caught me by the waist, surprising me, and lifted me back into his arms a moment later. Our eyes met, both of us grinning as he carried me out deeper.

“Want to try swimming with scales?” he asked.

My heart pounded erratically. “You think I can?”

“I know you can, Leviathan.”

Aww.

“What if it changes me more?”

It was a stupid question, and I knew that, but I had to ask anyway.

“Shifting into a phoenix didn’t change you,” he pointed out.

That was actually a good point.

“You’re already a leviathan in here.” He tapped the center of my chest. “You don’t have to truly change anything about yourself, Blue, except your form. And that other form is already within you.”

When he said it like that, it sounded easy.

Other shifters were only born with two forms; shifter, and human. My magic connected their human forms to their shifter, and vice versa. But I wasn’t like the other shifters; I had every form inside me, I just had to connect myself to them.

And I knew exactly what magic it would take to do so. It was the same magic I’d been tapping into and using over and over again, for weeks.

Closing my eyes, I wrapped my arms around Tuslan’s shoulders for support before reaching for Tendira’s magic. It was thicker, there, in the water.

When I touched the magic, it rippled away from me. The movement was much more powerful, and much more responsive, than it had been when I’d done the same thing in the cities earlier.

Did water somehow magnify Tendira’s power?



25

My lips parted as my mind conjured an image of the map of Tendira.

There, in the center, or pretty damn near it, was a lake.

Water.

And if water multiplied the reach of Tendira's magic...

"How long does it take to run or fly to Siren Lake from Soul Mountain?" I asked Tuslan.

"Depends how fast you are."

The original Queen and her mate were probably really damn fast.

"At your speed?" I checked.

"Around four hours in dragon form, less than eight in wolf."

Four hours was pretty fast. However the original Shifter Queen had tied the shifters to those of us who had followed her, she would've needed access to the entirety of Tendira at once.

And though my control over Tendira's power was growing rapidly, I doubted it would ever get to the point where I could cover all of the continent in magic.

But if water worked as an amplifier...

"I think I can tie everyone to the mountain, at once. If I just go to Siren Lake, I think I'll be able to access all of Tendira."

"Then we'll go to Siren Lake." His grip on me tightened. "But we'll figure that out tomorrow, Mesa. Tonight, you're shifting for me."

"For you?" I popped an eye open, retaining my hold on Tendira's magic.

"Yes, for me. I want to see you with scales."

That was fair. As the only leviathan, he probably wondered what someone else like him even looked like.

"Fine. But if we race, and I suck at swimming as a massive dragon-snake-fish, you have to let me win anyway."

He chuckled. "Deal." His lips met my forehead as I shut my eye and focused on the magic.

Finding the place all my forms resided was still much harder than finding someone else's, but I was faster, now that I had more experience with it. And when I was inside, tying all of my forms together was more of a challenge too.

With my forms connected, I released Tendira's magic and gave my own a moment to breathe. The two magics did not mix well, and I didn't want to piss them off in any way.

When there'd been enough of a pause, I focused on the water flowing around me. With my phoenix form, the urge had been irresistible, but I'd already used my fire before. It had been an accident, but having already used Tuslan's flames, the magic came naturally so I knew the feel of it.

"Can you push your Leviathan power at me?" I asked him, needing a little help.

"Sure." His power slowly crept into the connection we shared. It didn't move the way the fire did, eating and blazing and burning and needing. It was slow, and insanely strong, and incredibly steady.

A feeling of rightness settled over me, and I tried to connect with the part of my magic that resonated so well.

It came to the surface at my call, and my skin cooled. A breath left me as I felt my body change, more slowly than it had when I'd turned into a phoenix.

A disbelieving laugh escaped Tuslan as I slid into the water, my body feeling... odd.

Longer, and less cold, and... well, honestly, just weird.

"Beasts, Mesa. You're fucking incredible." His hand slid over my scales, and I shuddered at the feeling. It was weird, but good.

“Strange, isn’t it?” he asked, stroking my scales again. “Imagine being touched for the first time in centuries, and feeling that.”

A snort escaped me, and it sounded super weird, but Tuslan just grinned at me.

I itched to ask him what color my scales were—and then remembered that I was really damn long.

Turning in the water, I realized my body had been moving the whole time I’d been listening to Tuslan. Like with the flying, I seemed to naturally understand how to use this form. It was the strangest feeling.

My scales flashed in front of me, and I felt Tuslan’s pride deep in my belly.

“They’re blue. Just as blue as your eyes; maybe bluer.”

I could see that.

“You’ll sneak away from any predator with ease,” he practically purred at me, stroking my scales some more. “The way you blend into the water will give you the upper hand on anything and anyone, you beautiful creature.”

For some reason, the words made me want to preen.

I slipped away from him instead, teasing him into the water with me. I wanted him to show me how to use this body, how to swim fast and have fun.

His body wrapped around mine, sliding over me and around me. He was thicker than I was by a good six inches, at least. Maybe more. But I was far from small.

He led me out into the deeper water, never moving so far that we weren't touching. The feel of his scales on mine was uncomfortable, at first, but then the smooth, silky brush of our scales grew calming.

We swam and played until I was good and tired, and Tuslan gave me some of his energy without me asking, as we headed back.

It didn't charge me up as much as it used to, but it was very much appreciated.

When we reached the shore, we shifted to our phoenix forms as we flew back, our fire drying us off as we went. Our clothes were abandoned back on the beach, but we were the only ones who really went there anyway. And if we scandalized some random innocent bystander, I was fine with it.

But, after Tuslan dropped me off at home and got me all comfortable in the bed, he kissed me and slipped out to go retrieve them. And I fell asleep before he got home.

I woke to yelling outside. Disoriented, I looked around, and found myself still in Tuslan's house. Our house.

But he wasn't in bed, and by the smell of the blankets, he hadn't come in since he dropped me off.

I grabbed my robe off the foot of the bed and tied it around me as I walked to the door. Peeking outside, I found a mass of people gathered, and... fighting?

“The Tidals won’t stop coming after us while she’s alive!” someone yelled. Whoever they were, they were buried far enough in the crowd that I couldn’t see them. There must’ve been a hundred people there.

Apparently not everyone in the Blood Pack was on board with me being there.

“They’ll come for her again, and they’ll take our children too,” another cried out.

I’d never heard of the Tidals taking children. If they’d tried that, they would’ve truly been eradicated instead of locked up. Children were important; really important. Especially to the family-oriented packs, like Valley and Pine. I ached for the Valley Pack, and hoped they all got away, even while I doubted that was the case.

But maybe, by some miracle, they had.

“Anyone who so much as looks at my mate wrong, will die.” Tuslan’s voice was calm—maniacally calm.

Which meant he was probably about to rip someone’s head off just to prove a point.

I opened the door and strode out of our house. Tuslan’s emotions hit me hard; worry, and fear, and anger, and *possessiveness*.

I shot Tuslan a dark look. “*This* is what your meetings have been about?”

His jaw clenched as he started to reach for me. I stepped away, glancing down and finding myself pretty damn much naked, with my robe hanging open fairly wide. Luckily, I'd at least tied the ribbon.

Guess I knew why he was feeling possessive.

I threw a barrier over my body, covering everything but my neck and face. Then, I flung some more of my magic into the air, making the power vibrate rapidly so it gave off the feeling of being bigger and stronger than it was. With a bit more barrier magic, I amplified my voice and yelled, "That's enough."

The crowd went silent.

"The Tidals killed me," I told them. "They cornered me, and ended my life. They're the reason you went savage. If Tuslan hadn't revived me, all of you would still be savage now, yet here you are, trying to convince him to leave? So that what, we can take over another pack? Strengthen it, instead of yours? Because let's be real; you're not going to beat your own Alpha in a fight. None of his leads will fight with you, and they don't lose. If you're afraid to stay here, then leave. There's the door." I gestured to the forest.

Continuing, I added, "We've spent months of our lives saving your asses, and Tuslan's donated *centuries* of his time to making your lives better. If you have a problem, you can submit a complaint like anyone else. If you want a different Alpha, get the hell off my lawn, and out of our city. It's the middle of the night; have a fucking brain. Tuslan started this pack, and there are what, a hundred of you? Compared to thousands in the city? Walk away if that's what you want, but don't sit here, throwing a fit."

I grabbed Tuslan's hand, and his fingers slid tightly between mine.

"And if you wake me up again, I will throw an ice cold barrier around you until you're so cold you piss yourselves. So get the hell out." I pointed to the forest again, and the group dispersed.

Tuslan tugged me back toward the house. "Mesa," he said, his voice low and gravelly.

"Yeah, yeah, I know I'm practically naked," I complained.

"No, Mesa." He tugged me to a stop on our doorstep, taking my face in his hands. "Thank you. I was going to kill a few of them."

"They're so obnoxious, they may as well be asking for it." I shrugged, and he pressed his lips to mine briefly.

A yawn escaped me as I shuffled inside, pulling him with me.

His body folded around mine as we got situated into bed together, and we slept.



26

The next morning, we flew into the middle of the Pine Pack with a few of the Lead Wolves. Tuslan and I had debated heading for Siren Lake instead, but ultimately decided that dealing with Jalvo and strengthening the Pine Pack was probably a better call.

Alyx stayed back to keep an eye on the Pack, and Dovu stayed too—not with her, of course.

“Should we hunt Jalvo down, or just let Mesa do her thing so he comes to us?” Keena checked, looking between me and Tuslan.

“We may as well conserve energy.” Tuslan shrugged.

“Okay, Let’s find a lake.” I glanced around the capitol, but obviously, there wasn’t a lake beside us. I’d seen one nearby as we landed, though, I just couldn’t remember where. “I’m going to see how many people I can catch if I use water to increase my magic.”

The words got me nods all around.

Tuslan gave the rest of the orders, gesturing to Keena and Ellery. “You two can start hunting Jalvo and his Leads while Mesa uses her power, and whichever finds them first, meets back here.” He looked at the men. “You two, sniff around for

any trace of Tidals. I'd be surprised if they haven't planted someone here yet.

Everyone nodded and parted ways.

Tuslan and I walked in the direction he could apparently smell water. Even though I'd connected all of my forms, because I had only shifted to two others besides my human form, my senses were about on-par with a three-form's, so Tuslan's were much stronger.

"Do you really think Jalvo will stick around here with his mate missing?" I checked.

"Yes. Her scent, I'm sure, is long-gone, and after he checked all of their favorite places and anywhere else he could think of, he would've returned home in hopes that she'll come back to him. I'm sure he doesn't remember that she's been captured, in his savage state," Tuslan explained.

I frowned. "That's really sad."

"We'll get her back. She's one of your Queens, right?"

"I'd hardly call them mine, but I think so."

"Will you give her access to her shifter forms, assuming we find her alive?" His voice was curious.

"Yes. Whether she ever decides to shift will be up to her, of course, but if we were meant to be shifters, we deserve to have the choice." I paused. "And besides, I won't be able to tell the difference between a shifter and a Queen when I'm connecting everyone back to all of their forms. The Queens will just have to

figure it out.” We weren’t fantastic at adapting, but something told me that the adaption to being a shifter would come as easily to them as it had so far to me.

We approached the lake, and I grimaced at the sight of it. I was used to the clear, blue water of the ocean around the Blood and Royal lands, and the lake was about as far as you could get from that. The water was murky and green, with questionable plants growing over the top and around the edges of it.

“Do you think there’s a grodile in there?” I asked Tuslan.

“Undoubtedly.” His eyes shifted and trailed over the water, looking for the scaled lizard-beast twice as long as any human and half as tall, too. Stripping his pants off, he handed them to me. “Put up a barrier to force him to run away from you and the city’s, and give me a minute.”

My eyebrows were raised really damn far into my forehead, but I nodded.

The barrier went up as my male waded into the disgusting water, and I couldn’t help the stress ball in my abdomen as he disappeared beneath the non-moving surface. I caught a flash of red scales before he disappeared beneath the waves.

My barrier was cold and slippery, the opposite of what a grodile would want, and tapered before it reached me, so he wouldn’t fit if he tried to go in my direction.

My body was tense and waiting, and suddenly, the grodile burst through the surface with a rumbly roar/snarl sound that scared the shit out of me.

Maybe I was a shifter now, but I sure as hell didn't know how to fight as one.

He took off so damn fast that my jaw actually dropped open, my barriers tightening around me.

It was a few more tense minutes until my giant red Leviathan finally surfaced. His confidence was motivating, but then he tilted his head toward the lake, gesturing for me to join him in the water.

I wanted to protest, but with Tendira on the line and the Valley Pack already taken over, what choice did I have?

Nausea clenched my stomach as I pulled off my pants, having followed Tuslan's lead in going shoeless for the trip since he knew more about being a shifter than I did. After setting mine and Tuslan's pants down carefully, and more slowly than I necessarily needed to, I made my way slowly into the nasty water, my face puckering at the feel of slime against my toes and legs.

I felt Tuslan's humor in my abdomen, so when I saw the water dragon shaking, I knew he was laughing.

I flipped him my middle finger. "Not all of us are ancient, insane water monsters, asshole,"

He shook harder, his laughter growing. He flung a chunk of slippery green moss my way, and I couldn't help but laugh too, before flinging it back. It collided with the center of his gigantic head, and he shook harder.

We tossed the moss back and forth a few more times before he slithered over to me, wrapping his gigantic self around me

loosely. He breathed against my neck, and I knew he was scent-marking me. Maybe it was just the leviathan within me, but I liked it, and found myself wanting to mark him back.

But there wasn't time for it, then.

I left my eyes open this time as I reached for Tendira's magic. It flared to life so much faster while I was in the water, despite the nasty moss and who knew what other shit was underwater with my lower-half.

The process of reaching out, searching for life, was almost a natural one now that I'd done it so many times.

Tendira's magic caught on the living creatures surrounding us, and I pushed it outward, and outward. It moved so much easier, spreading so much more rapidly than it ever had before, and my lips parted as my magic spread out far enough that I felt the edges of the Blood Pack, even.

I could've pushed it further; I knew I could've. But with our current plan, that wasn't what I needed to do, so I drew it to what I thought might be the edges of the Pine Pack's land. Connecting those to Soul Mountain, I used the mass of magic to catch all of the shifters' forms and bind them together, the way they were supposed to be.

As their magics changed, connecting, the magic between them and Tendira grew slightly brighter. My lips parted as I watched the way the magic fed each other, strengthening one another.

The shifters hadn't been connected to Tendira at all, before I did that. But it looked like with every connection, the land's magic surged. Each surge was small, so small that I hadn't seen

it before I'd been in the water, but the small surges added up rapidly.

I let go of the magic as it wrapped itself up, and Tuslan's scaly body wrapped tighter around me when I dropped it altogether.

He tugged me to the side, and I fell with a shriek.

Moss splatted against my face, and I spat it out as I scrambled back to my feet.

The leviathan was shaking again—that damn shifter.

Focusing on my own scaly monster form, I shifted.

Once again, the moss splatted against my face and body, but this time, I slipped over it and wrapped around Tuslan.

We wrestled in the slimy water, twisting and spiraling, bodies hitting the soft, slimy ground and bumping fish left and right. Some of them snapped at us, but Tuslan ate them when they tried.

By the time we slithered out of the small lake, shifting to human form as we reached the shore, we were both laughing so hard we couldn't breathe. We were coated from head to toe in lake gunk and moss and fish shit and who knew what else, so thickly covered in it that my hair was literally one solid, wet mass. But, it had been such a blast that I didn't even care anymore.

"Beasts, you're so damned massive," I panted, breath hitching as my ribs hurt with laughter. "I just can't hold you

down.”

“And you’re so damned slippery.” His human arms wrapped around me, dragging me to his chest as we both collapsed on the muddy bank. Pine trees surrounded us, thick enough that their branches obstructed our view of the blue sky over our heads. We laid together until our laughter faded to a soft sort of happiness that I just didn’t have a word to describe. Though I couldn’t describe it, there was absolutely nothing better.

The sex was great, the playing was a blast, and the companionship was heart-warming, but there wasn’t a way to explain the pure, comforting happiness I felt in that moment.

Loved, and held, and whole in a way I’d never been before. Tuslan hadn’t made me whole; the way I felt *because of* him made me whole. I’d always liked myself, humanity and curves and all. But I’d learned to see myself differently, since we’d fallen in love—and I’d changed, too. And the ways that I changed, the new way I saw myself... I loved me more because of it.

Because of him.

I’d read a lot of books where love took something from the couple. Where it asked them to be something smaller, something different. But the love I had with Tuslan, which felt like real love to me... it didn’t take. It gave. It strengthened, and accepted, and grew.

“I hope you don’t feel like I’ve trapped you,” I whispered. “Because I feel like you’ve set me free. I don’t want you to feel smaller because of me.”

“I knew who I was before I met you,” he murmured, stroking my back slowly. “Now, I know who I *want* to be. You give me

purpose, and make me happier than I knew was ever possible. In no way do you make me feel any smaller at all, Mesa. You've exposed me to new sides of myself; freed me from darkness I couldn't release. And beasts, Blue, there's nothing I can say to tell you how much that means to me."

"That's okay. You're really good at showing it." My lips met his cheek. "I love you."

"And I love you." His hand continued to stroke my back. "We should probably go find the others, shouldn't we." It was a question, but it wasn't, at the same time.

"Probably," I agreed.

Neither of us moved to go.

"They'll come looking for us when they've found Jalvo, though," I remarked a few minutes later.

"Yes. And they don't really need us for any of that," he agreed.

I lifted my head, and we exchanged grins.

The sound of wings flapping had me dropping my head back to Tuslan's chest with a sigh.

Hooves sounded on the dirt a moment later.

A peryton?

“Hey, lovebirds,” Keena called out, strolling over to us. I was laying on Tuslan, both of us absolutely covered in mud and shit, and neither of us had on anything but underwear. “Yeesh, what happened?”

“The lake attacked us.” I propped myself up on Tuslan’s chest, giving her a solemn look.

She sniffed the air. “Smells like scales.” Her eyes narrowed on me. “Did you shift again?”

Tuslan’s chest puffed up a bit, and his pride seeped into my middle again. “Last night, she discovered her leviathan form.”

Keena’s eyes rounded. “No fucking way. That’s awesome!” She offered me a hand.

I tried to take it, but crashed into Tuslan when he swept me up off the ground, setting me on my feet.

Possessive bastard.

His lips curved upward just slightly as he fought a smirk. He knew exactly what I was thinking.

“I want to see your leviathan form sometime, but for now, you guys should probably get back with me. And... take showers.” Her nose wrinkled as her gaze swept our bodies. “Gross.”

I bit back a grin.

Yeah, we were pretty gross.

“You found Jalvo?” Tuslan checked.

“Sort of.” Keena grimaced. “He’s a bit of a mess. You need to come see for yourselves.”



27

Tuslan instructed me how to clean my skin with my fire, and I practiced on him too before he was satisfied that I'd figured it out. When we were both clean, we tugged our pants on and shifted with Keena, hitting the skies.

She led us down to a large house at the center of the pack's land, with sprawling grassy fields surrounding it. Considering the lack of trees on the fields, and the thickness of the forest around them, I knew they'd been cut down some time ago and were well-maintained in their boring grassiness.

We landed just outside the house, and headed in. Tuslan didn't try to make me stay behind him, for once, and I appreciated that.

What we found in the kitchen was... interesting. Jalvo was tied to a wooden kitchen chair that looked like it was about to kick the bucket, and his face was bruised, as if he'd gotten in a fist fight or something.

"Just kill me and be done with it," Jalvo was snarling at someone when we walked in. "I betrayed the rest of the packs. They were supposed to let her go, and instead, they've tortured her more." His voice got all choked up, and he legitimately sounded a bit insane. "I can't take her pain. Just kill me—end our misery."

Tuslan strode into the kitchen, and Jalvo laughed bitterly. “Blood Alpha. Here to prolong my suffering?”

“No. The Tidals have taken over the Valley Pack; we’re here to help you retrieve your mate, so you can help the displaced Valley shifters.”

Jalvo blinked a few times. “You’re going to help me get Eela back?”

“Yes.” Tuslan didn’t hesitate.

Jalvo swallowed roughly, looking over at me. “This is her, then? The Queen they tried to kill?” His eyes flicked to my abdomen, and moved to Tuslan’s. “You won the desedra?”

“Just before the Tidals managed to end my female’s life,” Tuslan said, his voice a neutral mask. “You aren’t the only one who wants them dead.”

Shit.

We hadn’t agreed on that yet—whether or not we would be killing the Tidal leaders. Honestly, there didn’t seem to be a steady plan for after we got back Jalvo’s mate and the original Queen. But I was sure Tuslan had something cooking, even if he hadn’t said as much. The man could be violent, but he was also absolutely brilliant.

“My best men have tried to get her back and died in the process,” Jalvo said, his voice still empty of hope.

Tuslan responded calmly, “You know as well as I do that me and my people are far better than your best men.”

Damn.

Jalvo sighed, shoving a hand through his hair. It was dark and wild, contrasting his sickly-pale skin. “I know. What do you want for your help?” He looked ancient, which was a feat for a shifter who never aged.

“The city nearest my land. You’ll be taking in at least part of the Valley Pack, and the Royal Pack’s land too when their faction system falls, as we all know it will. You don’t need the land.

“Fine. We’ll need a few weeks to vacate it,” Jalvo said, his expression relaxing a bit. He must’ve expected Tuslan to ask for more.

“Can you locate her through your lalidro?” I asked him. I felt a tug on mine sometimes, when there was some distance between Tuslan and I.

“If I could locate her with my damn lalidro, I wouldn’t be sitting here, suffering with her,” he growled.

“You’ll speak kindly to my Queen,” Tuslan said, his voice suddenly very cold.

Jalvo’s head jerked impolitely, but it was better than good enough for me. “I don’t have any way to locate her.”

“Can you search for particular energy with Tendira’s magic?” Keena spoke up from behind us. I turned a bit to see her, but Tuslan’s position remained steady. I figured he and Jalvo were having some sort of dominance battle, and couldn’t have cared less about that shit.

The ring around my neck, nestled just below the thin necklace Tuslan had given me, began reaching for me. My mind responded in suit, and a vision appeared in my mind.

I saw myself take Jalvo's hand, and saw the magic in his abdomen come to life. When the vision-me released his hand, I followed the unique pulse of their combined magic out of the house.

The vision disappeared.

"What did it say?" Tuslan asked.

"I just need to take his hand, and I should be able to get a good enough latch on her energy to track it," I explained.

Tuslan didn't look thrilled about it, and his possessiveness seemed to grip me through the bond, but he stepped to the side to give me room for what I needed to do. I felt bad that he had to fight his instincts so hard for me, but at the same time, I appreciated it tremendously. And I knew that when all of the drama with the Tidals was said and done, life would calm back down and he wouldn't have so many things triggering those overly-possessive instincts.

Slipping one of my hands in Tuslan's, I took Jalvo's with my other.

Reaching for Tendira's energy, I waited for it to rise up and meet me. When it had, I followed it to Jalvo's abdomen. With my eyes closed and my mind focused, it took a few minutes, but I managed to find the steady beat of his mate's heart in his abdomen. It was strong and seemed healthy to me, but I wasn't the one experiencing her pain. Hell, I wasn't even sure how him

experiencing her pain was possible. I assumed it had something to do with the feelings-in-synch thing Tuslan and I already had going one.

Would our bond change when we were fully mated?

It took me a few more minutes to decide which direction the heartbeat was coming from, but when I had, I knew I'd found the general direction of the man's mate.

"I've got it," I told them, releasing the magic. "Jalvo will need to come with me wherever we're going, in case I lose touch with the feel of her energy and magic."

Jalvo's expression grew shocked. "You found her?"

"I couldn't point it out on a map or anything, but I do know which way to go to find her."

He stood abruptly, taking the chair with him. I heard Keena snort, but no one commented on it.

"We found a few Tidal Assholes pretending to be rabid, keeping an eye on the place, Paik told Jalvo. "Threw 'em in one of your spare bedrooms."

"My Leads will deal with them. Let's go get my mate."

I glanced at Tuslan, and he lifted his shoulders. He didn't say as much, but I knew that if we'd been in Jalvo's situation, he'd have been just as desperate.

Hell, he'd probably be worse.

“Tomo,” Tuslan looked at his right-hand-man.

His head bobbed. “Axe and I can stay and keep an eye on everything here.”

I looked to Keena, waiting for an argument, but she gave us a thumbs-up.

Huh.

The five of us headed out: me and Tuslan along with Paik, Ellery, and Jalvo.

Jalvo’s third form was a bear, so we had to stick to the ground. My only shifter forms thus far were a flying one and a swimming one, though, so I was either going to have to ride on Tuslan’s back... or shift to a new form.

“Let’s go,” Jalvo growled.

I was starting to see his resemblance to the bear he could shift into, though his body physically remained human.

Tuslan tilted his head at me, waiting to see what I wanted to do.

“I... I think I should probably have a wolf form. If I’m going to do the shifter thing,” I said, wrapping my arms around my stomach a bit uncomfortably.

“We’ll be ready in a bit,” Tuslan told the others. His palm landed on my lower back, and he and I headed into the forest a

ways to get away from everyone else. “Are you sure?” he asked me.

He never pushed me, and I loved that about him.

“I’m sure.” I nodded once.

I was, wasn’t I?

Sure, yeah, I was going for it. Why not?

I already had two brand new beast forms, why not go for a third?

“Alright, Red. Hit me with it.” I gestured toward my chest.

Tuslan’s magic washed over me gently, and I let the feelings sit and simmer.

Come on, come on, come on...

Nope.

I didn’t recognize that magic in myself; not even a little.

A frown turned my lips down. “Hmm.”

“My mate’s being tortured while you dick around,” Jalvo snarled as he crashed through a bush, stumbling into the small gap in the trees that Tuslan and I occupied.

“Would you like to repeat that?” Tuslan asked, his voice low and dangerous as he faced the other Alpha.

Jalvo’s face went red, and then darkened.

I couldn’t feel his emotions the way I could feel Tuslan’s, but I didn’t need to. Jalvo was clearly afraid of the Blood Alpha, and I could feel Tuslan’s anger with the large man facing him. But Jalvo was just worried about his mate, and I didn’t want anyone fighting just before we headed into Tidal territory.

“It’s alright, I’m ready to go.” I put a hand on Tuslan’s arm.

“I’ll meet you back there, then,” Jalvo said gruffly, heading back in the direction he’d come from.

“We can keep trying,” Tuslan told me.

“I know. But right now, I care more about getting to the original Queen and to Jalvo’s mate.” I gave him a quick smile. “We’ll figure it out later.”

He nodded, and we joined the others. They all shifted to their wolf forms, and I slipped onto Tuslan’s back before everyone took off into the forest.

I used Tendira’s magic to check on Eela every twenty or thirty minutes, and when I told Tuslan where to go, he adjusted course and the others followed.

Rather than stopping, the wolves ran through the night. Tuslan had to feed me some of his energy to keep me awake, which I felt bad about, but he growled at me when I told him to save his energy, so I shut up.

We stopped for a few minutes in the middle of the night, in the mountains just outside the valley that the Tidals had taken over.

“We should sleep the rest of the night, watch for patterns throughout the day, and then make our move,” Tuslan told the others.

The rest of us agreed—except Jalvo.

“My mate’s being tortured. I’d sooner put myself down than sit out here through another night of her pain. Stay if you want—I’m going in now.”

He took off into the forest, and Tuslan grimaced.

The rest of us exchanged looks.

“He’s going to get himself killed,” Ellery grumbled. “We’ll have to follow him.”

“He knows us well enough to assume that we’ll follow.” Tuslan’s head bobbed.

“We could let him sweat it out for a few minutes, though,” Paik said with a grin.

The rest of us mirrored the expression.

Sure enough, I heard him walking back toward us nearly-silently, his feet much slower than they had been.

“Realized you don’t want to die, have you?” Tuslan called out to him.

The man flipped him off, and Tuslan chuckled. “We can consider going in without preparation, but we only have one chance, and I’d rather not lose it.”

The man finally nodded, though he was reluctant and pretty damn sullen about it.

“We’ll stay through the night and observe until tomorrow,” he finally, reluctantly, agreed.

We couldn’t build a fire without the chance of alerting the Tidals to our presence—something I was pretty well aware of given my being captured by the Blood Pack. It had worked out well for me, but something about the people we were searching for being tortured told us this time, it wouldn’t.

Paik and Ellery went hunting together in wolf form while Jalvo paced a gap in the trees, from where we could look down on the sprawling city deep in the valley below us.

Tuslan had our food caught and prepared as fast as usual, and we sat down together with our backs to one of the massive trees in the pocket of forest we’d claimed for the night.

After we ate and cleaned up, we curled up together on the ground and fell asleep like the damned outdoorsing-professionals we’d become, both of us tired after the long day of flying and running.



28

Early the next the morning, we all took a dip in an icy mountain stream to disguise our scents, and then followed Jalvo's mate's magic to a building near the outskirts of the city. It looked like your normal home, but I assumed that was because it had only been commandeered a few weeks earlier.

It took a lot of effort to keep Jalvo from charging in after his mate, but I dropped Tendira's magic and kept us quiet while he lost his cool for a bit. Since his anger was understandable, no one was angry or anything. We all just felt kind of bad for him.

After that, we spent the rest of the day exploring the city. There was a chance I wouldn't be able to get us all out undetected, or that we'd be separated, and we all needed to know where to go when we were on our way out of the town. Together, we made a formidable force, but we weren't stupid enough to think we could take on an entire pack of Tidals alone. I didn't even know how to fight.

While we snuck around, I kept everyone covered with my barriers, keeping us all hidden from sight. It was a decent drain on my energy, but one that definitely seemed worth it.

When the sun went down and the Tidals ambled off to their houses, we sat curled up uncomfortably close to a house across the street from the one that held Eela.

We watched as a few bastards strode out of the house, and Jalvo gave us their names—and cursed while doing so.

My barriers could hide us and silence us to anyone outside; they would've made me a damn good spy. It was really too bad I'd been born into a castle.

Jalvo recognized most of the men moving in and out of the building as the higher-up Tidal Pack members. Some of them were Lead Wolves, others were just plain-old violent assholes. And not violent the way Tuslan was violent, where they saved violence for the people who deserved it—violent where they got some kind of sick pleasure from inflicting pain on other people.

We watched people leaving over the next few hours. We were all fighting yawns, and if my eyes had been human still, it would've been pitch-black outside. With my shifter eyes, I could see just fine.

When no one had gone in or out in an hour or so, I looked at Tuslan and whispered, “What do you hear?”

He had super-hearing to go with the rest of his advanced senses, so I figured he'd know the state of the building.

“There are two guards left. Maybe three, but if there is, the third's not moving much.”

Well, that was probably as good as we would get it.

Jalvo stood abruptly. “Let's go.”

Tuslan grabbed him by the bicep, sending the man a warning look. “You're too invested in this. Let us take the lead.”

It looked like it took him a lot of effort to do so, but Jalvo jerked his head in a nod. “I’ll follow you.”

That was good, at least.

“Ellery, stick on Mesa,” Tuslan instructed, his voice low even though I was blocking our noise.

She didn’t hesitate. “Will do.”

I would’ve protested, but there was every chance I’d be in over my head in there if it didn’t go as simply as we hoped. And when did anything ever go as simply as we hoped? If not for my barrier magic, I would definitely have been booted from the team already for my lack of fighting skills, and for my overprotective almost-mate’s peace of mind.

As we approached, Tuslan gave one last instruction. “Everyone knows where to meet if we get separated. Paik and I will carry Jalvo and Eela if needed—Mesa and Ellery, you just fly like hell.”

There was more of the overprotectiveness I’d come to know and love/hate.

“Mmhmm,” I nodded.

The first guard was stationed just outside the building.

“I can take him out silently,” I whispered.

Tuslan gave me a dark look, stepping past me. I kept my barrier glued to his figure, hiding him, as he grabbed the guard by the throat.

I didn't hear a crunch or anything otherwise horrible and disturbing, but when Tuslan and Paik tucked the man behind a bush just outside the place, I knew without a shred of doubt that he was dead.

It made me sick, but considering the guy was protecting a house they were using to trap and torture shifters and ex-Queens, what other choice was there? Knocked-out shifters didn't stay out long, and we had no idea what was going to happen in there or how long it would take.

Maybe there was a better option, but whatever it was, the one we'd gone with was the best call for our situation.

And I'd have to be okay with that, somehow.

Paik pulled the door open, ducking inside. I waited for noise to erupt, yelling or fighting, but none came.

Paik's head popped back out of the door, and he gestured us all inside.

We slipped in after him, with Jalvo taking up the back, Ellery between him and me, Tuslan between me and Paik.

We found ourselves in a normal-looking sitting room, with couches and potted plants and shit.

"This used to be someone's house," Ellery murmured.

“Spooky,” I muttered back.

I hoped they were okay.

“Are we splitting up?” Jalvo asked the men.

“No.” Tuslan gave no reasoning for the answer, but then again, he was in charge. Everyone had accepted that, even Jalvo.

We stood in place for a moment, and I imagined Tuslan and the other guys were trying to listen for movement. I couldn’t hear a thing, so I waited.

“Down,” Tuslan said.

Paik led us through the room, around some things. I hugged the barrier to everyone, trying to keep us covered and quiet.

We found the stairs quickly—and a guard sitting on them, his feet sprawled out in front of him and his back to us.

Paik took him out before his life could even flash before his eyes.

Paik and Tuslan hauled him to a closet, and Ellery stepped in front of me, putting me between her and Jalvo until Tuslan and Paik returned a moment later, and then she slid back into her place.

We moved silently down the stairs, my barrier still hugging the group. It was a few layers thick, and I was getting a bit tired, but the stress-ball in my stomach thanks to our assassin-rescue-attempt was keeping me plenty awake and on-edge.

My nose twitched when I smelled blood as we neared the bottom of the stairs.

Horror blossomed within me as the stench grew bigger, and heavier, and more overpowering.

Jalvo was swearing behind us; not exactly sneaky. But if his mate's blood was mixed in with everything I was smelling, I couldn't blame him for that.

We stopped at the bottom of the stairs when Paik came face-to-face with another guard.

The man frowned, sniffing the air.

He stepped away, sniffing again.

Ha.

See, I wasn't weak. Just... different.

Of course, Paik killed him, and my stomach turned.

"Drop the barrier?" Tuslan asked me, his gaze sweeping the room. "Your magic's scent is a bit strong."

Well, that was embarrassing.

His fingers stroked my hip softly, and his emotions told me the scent wasn't a bad one, even though it was apparently strong.

“I can’t smell a thing over the blood,” Ellery remarked, as I took down the barrier.

“Two captives,” Tuslan said, his eyes sweeping the room again. He hadn’t let his guard down yet, and from the looks of it, he wasn’t going to. “Females, both of them.”

My heartbeat suddenly picked up. “Do you think it’s the Queen?”

“We’ll find out. Jalvo, go get your female.”

The Alpha had been swearing and pacing, letting Tuslan make the call, and let out a praise to the beasts as he crossed the room. Paik followed him when Tuslan tilted his head, leaving me and Tuslan with Ellery.

“Let’s go.” He led us into the other closed-door bedroom.

We walked into a carpeted room of questionable prior use, and found a woman on her knees on the floor, slumped up against the wall her wrists and ankles were chained to.

I recognized her immediately, though she was much worse-off than she’d been when I saw her.

“Beasts,” I gasped, crossing the room.

Tuslan caught me with a hand over my abdomen, and a warning look.

I would've argued, but he was in charge, and he knew what he was doing a lot more than I did. And ultimately, neither of us knew who the original Shifter Queen was, despite reading books written by her and featuring her. We'd never read her name, or any details about what she was like or how she felt about things.

"Ellery," Tuslan said.

"On it." She crossed the room. I covered her in a barrier, protecting her skin as my male tucked me partially behind him. I could still see fine, but his body was between mine and the Queen's.

"Hey," Ellery said in a voice so soft I didn't recognize it. "We're going to get you out of here."

The Queen grew partially conscious, but not fully.

"Tuslan." I gestured toward the woman with my eyes. I wanted to heal her—she was the one who'd taught me how to help the shifters, in a roundabout way.

"I'll do it." He stepped away from me.

I wanted to sigh, but truthfully, understood his caution and felt a bit of it myself.

He crouched beside the woman, gently putting a hand on her shoulder. His fire ran over her skin quickly, and he removed his hand as soon as it blinked out.

The golden lalidro on her belly was visible beneath a few layers of dried blood over her light brown skin, marking her as mated.

But where was her mate?

“What happened?” The Shifter Queen looked around, her face a bit groggy. Ellery was unlocking the chains on her wrists and ankles with a key I hadn’t noticed my friend find.

“The Tidals captured you,” Tuslan told her, stepping back into place just in front of me.

Unfocused eyes moved over Tuslan, and landed on me. “You found me.”

“Apparently.” I bobbed my head.

“We don’t have time for reunions. Where are they keeping your mate?” Tuslan asked. “I didn’t hear or smell anyone else in the house.”

“They’ve forced him into his leviathan form and are using him as a workhorse.” Her face grew tighter and angrier. “I’m going to destroy them.”

Yikes.

“Let’s contemplate more murder when we’re out of here, okay?” I gestured toward the door.

The Shifter Queen nodded, and we all slipped back out.

“Your mate has a leviathan form?” Ellery asked the Queen, behind me, as we headed out. Jalvo took the rear again, and he cradled his mate like she was the most precious thing he’d ever

held. Even though he was a large part of the reason we were in that mess at all, I was glad we'd helped him and his mate get back together. No one deserved to be kept from the people they loved.

“Yes. You may have heard of him; he’s called The Omen.”

The Omen? I'd grown up hearing horror stories about him, alongside the Blood Alpha.

“I thought the Omen was dead,” I said.

“As we wanted you to. We were content to live our own lives until the Tidal bastards ripped my husband out of our home and forced me into their hands. They were supposed to release him when I turned myself in.”

“Why didn’t you just shift forms and, you know, eat them?” I checked.

She shot me a dark look. “Tendira’s magic ate away at my beast forms centuries ago. A mated Queen can only have one or the other, and I chose creation magic.”

My lips formed an “O” shape.

That wasn’t good.

Not at all.

I liked being a shifter; hell, I *loved* being a shifter.

That wasn’t the time to think about it, though.

“I’m going to get my mate back. Release me, or come and help.” The Queen stumbled down the street.



29

I wrapped the Queen—who I realized may be verifiably insane—in barrier magic along with the rest of us, since we did still want to keep ourselves quiet and hidden. We made our way down the street at her pace, and I kept looking around, waiting for someone to see through my magic and attack us.

No one did.

“The docks are nowhere near here,” I tried to reason with her, since none of the others seemed to have the balls or the desire to do it. We continued walking as I added, “We’ll have to fly a few hours to reach that part of the valley.”

“Then we’ll fly.” She looked at me with wild eyes. “I won’t leave him.”

Well, damn. I understood that.

“We’re running low on energy here,” I gestured to my group. “We need to rest for a bit before we go on another spy mission.”

Ellery’s snort behind me had me lifting my middle finger at her over my shoulder.

“Then steal energy from Tendira,” the Shifter Queen snarled. “Because I’m not leaving my mate.”

Steal energy from Tendira?

Apparently there were more uses for Tendira's magic than I'd realized.

"No; we're not stealing energy from anything," I said sharply. "You're going to sit your ass down and eat a meal and tell us everything you know. I'm not walking *my* mate into a trap because you can't take eight seconds to tell us what's been going on. We're not a damned group for hire, and if we were, you haven't hired us."

Tuslan's hand met my lower back gently, and his murmur of, "Easy," was so quiet I doubted the queen would've been able to tell what he'd said.

"I'm not leaving my mate," she repeated. "And if your mate can't handle a trap, you've probably married one of the younger, wimpier shifter men. They've all been treated far too softly."

What a bitch.

I started, "I don't care who you are, I'm not going to—"

"You're free to leave if you want," Tuslan said, his voice much calmer than mine had been. "But we don't have the information we'd need to fly to the docks right now. It would be an unnecessary risk, and one extra day of suffering for one person is an easy choice compared to what could amount to weeks of torture for all eight of us."

Had he just played diplomat on me?

Dammit, he had.

And he'd done it perfectly.

"I'm going," the Shifter Queen said, her voice iron.

She stalked off toward the coast.

"I'll follow her," Paik said casually. "No way she makes it more than a mile or so in that condition."

I knew he was probably right, and I felt bad for her. She'd survived hell and now wanted her mate back, the same way anyone would. That didn't mean we could just go ahead and jump into a rescue, though. We hadn't done that with Jalvo's mate for a reason, and there was a decent chance that our day of snooping was the reason that nothing went terribly, horribly bad during our rescue.

If we went in blindly, there was a better chance that we wouldn't walk out—and I wasn't on board with that.

I did have a lot of questions I still needed to ask the Shifter Queen, though. Such as, how the hell a person was supposed to choose between creation magic or being a shifter.

And why she'd tied the humans to the Queens in the first place.

When we found a place to stop, nestled between a few small mountains, Tuslan went to grab some food.

Ellery flew off to make sure Paik didn't need any backup with the Queen, and Jalvo and his mate were curled up against a large tree, talking in nearly-silent whispers. I'd seen him wiping away tears a handful of times already at that point, and felt a little bad for making him go after his mate after we'd made sure everything was safe.

Sure, it was probably better the way we'd done it. Less death had occurred, and less fighting. But if my mate was the one in trouble, I wouldn't have hesitated to go after him. With or without anyone else.

"Maybe we should go help her," I murmured to Tuslan, as he approached with food for us and for the other Alpha and his mate too.

"She's not thinking straight, and a leader who's not thinking straight will lead you to your death without a second thought," Tuslan said

"She's just worried about him. If you were in his situation, I'd be so worried about you that I'd do a hundred absolutely insane things to get you back."

"I know, and I would too." He set the food down on the rocks I'd found for that purpose when we arrived. His hands cupped my face, clean thanks to his fire, and he pressed his lips to mine. "But I won't risk you by going in blind. If you hadn't said anything, I was going to have to. And I don't mind playing the bad guy." He kissed me again, a bit slower, with a little lip and tongue. "And she was bossing you around, which didn't help. You hate being commanded," he murmured against my lips.

My face wrinkled. "Don't remind me."

A soft chuckle vibrated his chest. "Let's eat, Blue."

Paik and Ellery returned as we were finishing. He was carrying the original Queen, and she was unconscious, as expected.

“We’ll need to get some food and water into her,” Ellery told me and Tuslan. “She seems like she’s been starving.”

When the Shifter Queen came to, her personality seemed to have changed drastically. She was quiet and uncertain, and seemed extremely sad.

We managed to get her to eat some food before she curled up and fell asleep, and Ellery and I both ended up snuggling with her just so we could make sure she didn’t freeze during the night. Tuslan slept in his wolf form beside me, but I could tell he didn’t sleep much. He didn’t seem to trust the other Queen very much, which seemed reasonable, given that she’d already had two massive changes in character. It was probably just stress and trauma, but Tuslan wasn’t someone who just hoped for the best.

I couldn’t sleep much either, so I spent much of the night petting Tuslan’s fur the way I had when he really was just a wolf. As rough as those days had been, I was glad I’d gotten to see him that way—and I’d always be glad for the memories.

We left before the morning truly began, since none of us had slept much anyway. The other Queen flew with Ellery, and Paik remained close to her. Jalvo and Eela stayed at our little campsite so she could continue to rest, and Tuslan attempted to teach him how to share energy with his mate before we left.

The way Paik had started to look at Ellery reminded me of the way Tuslan always seemed to be watching me.

Protectively.

Lovingly.

Like I mattered more than anything else in his world.

It made me feel special, to be honest. And maybe I wasn't supposed to want to feel special, but I did. And I liked it.

We reached the docks as the sun began to rise. As we approached, I heard the strangest roar—and saw a big green leviathan take a bite out of a person.

My stomach dropped, and I nearly forgot to keep flying. Tuslan nudged me back into the sky, and then dive-bombed the docks with a roar of his own. His massive dragon form sent shifters running, and, well, shifting. Paik was right by his side, heading for another group of shifters.

Guess we weren't going with the spy method after all.

Ellery tried to herd me off to the side, away from the fight, but I dove down after Tuslan.

I may not be good at the actual fighting part of a fight, but I could still be useful.

But, by the time I landed, Tuslan, Paik, and the green leviathan had already ended the fight.

Ellery landed behind me, and the original Queen—whose name we still hadn't gotten out of her—sprinted toward the leviathan.

The Omen.

He shifted into a massive man dressed in holey, ragged pants that looked like they had been blue at one point; Tidal blue. He had dark skin and wild hair, and every ounce of his attention was focused on the woman sprinting toward him.

The Queen crashed into The Omen's arms, and he hugged her so fiercely, yet so carefully. It was absolutely adorable.

They spoke rapidly, both of them crying without a damned care as to who might see them or judge them for being emotional.

Tuslan's arm slid around my waist, and I tilted my head to the side, to rest on his shoulder.

"Three leviathans on one dock," Paik whistled, strolling up to us.

My eyes caught on his hand—linked with Ellery's—and my eyebrows shot upward. "Are you two..."

"Holding hands? Yes, we are. Astute observation, Blood Queen." Paik swiveled a hand out in front of himself as he bowed at the waist, still holding onto Ellery.

I looked at her, and her face went a bit pink, but she didn't say anything.

Aww.

“You’ll have to train someone else on how to be the most trustworthy male for women to turn to when they’re in heat,” Tuslan remarked.

“Are you volunteering?” Paik shot him a grin.

A growl rose up, and everyone looked at me.

I looked down at my chest, and back up at them. “That wasn’t me. I don’t growl.”

Ellery laughed. “Apparently, you do.”

“Any female wolf would take offense to someone suggesting her male sleep with another woman,” Tuslan said, his hand moving slowly and soothingly over my hip.

Another growl escaped me. I hadn’t even realized I could growl—and now I was growling uncontrollably?

What the hell?

“Marking him will help,” Ellery told me.

My eyebrows lifted. “How would you know that?”

The pink in her cheeks turned to a deep, dark red.

My eyes dipped to their abdomens, but I didn’t see any lalidros.

“Our magic hasn’t connected yet,” Ellery admitted. “I don’t know if it will. We’re still trying to figure out what we want.”

Well, that was definitely new for Ellery. She was usually the person you could trust to have an opinion and be decisive about it.

“You’ve got nothing but time,” I waved it off.

“And you’ve got nothing but responsibilities,” Ellery remarked.

I grimaced.

The Omen and the Shifter Queen walked up to our group. His arms were wrapped around her tightly, and neither of them looked like they were even considering moving.

“We owe you all a thank-you,” The Omen said.

“The enemy of my enemy is my friend,” Paik said lightly.

“We won’t be staying to fight your war,” The Omen said, as if we’d come all the way there just to get him to help us. “What we’ve survived is more than enough, and what we’ve already done for Tendira was more than our fair-share. We’d prefer to live the rest of our lives away from all shifter communities,” he continued.

“Are you going to go back to your mountain?” I checked. The place had clearly been set up by them, for them.

“No. You’ve corrupted the energy there; we’ll find another place,” The Omen said vaguely.

The words reminded me of the cave Tuslan had mentioned in Sand territory. No one could enter, and it was well-hidden...

That was probably only one of their many homes. No one could spend an eternity in one mountain home, after all. Everything had to get old after a few hundred or thousand years, and then you’d want to move.

“You could save a lot of lives,” I said. “A five-form shifter and the only person who actually knows how to use Tendira’s magic? Think of all the people you could help.”

“We have—and we’re done.” The Omen’s voice was flat. “Tendira can live or die without us.”

Tuslan’s arm tightened around me. “At least explain what you meant when you said Tendira’s magic would consume Mesa’s beast forms.”

The original Shifter Queen laughed bitterly. “You couldn’t have assumed there was no cost to using the power of creation. Every time you channel Tendira’s magic, it channels you—and it’s a black hole for energy. I’m sure you noticed how quickly it latched onto the Shifters’ power.”

“Then why did you anchor all of the shifters to the Human Queens?” Ellery asked.

Anger flashed in the original Queen’s eyes. “Tendira was going to consume the rest of my power if I didn’t put it in a shifter, so I stuck it inside a female woman and trapped her in

human form, and then I tied the shifters to her to stop them from killing her and taking my magic out with them.”

I wanted to step back at that, to move away.

The Shifter Queen had used the first Human Queen as a vessel for her energy? How?

“I tried to take it back centuries ago, but the power had morphed. It was no longer mine to take, so I left the Queen and her shifters. Now, Tendira’s magic slowly eats away at my body and soul.” The Queen sounded pretty damn bitter about it, too.

My mind was spinning, though.

That would definitely take some time to wrap my head around.

“You sent Mesa to tap into Tendira’s magic, knowing it would begin to slowly consume her beast forms?” Tuslan asked, his voice low and dark.

“She wanted to know how to anchor the beasts, and other than reattaching them to herself—a temporary solution at best, given that the line of Queens will end now that she’s died—it was the only option.” The Queen lifted a bruised shoulder. “At least she won’t have to continue anchoring the babies every month. That seemed to be the worst part of it all.”

No, it wasn’t—that was the best part of it all.

“Whichever magic you use immediately after mating is the one you’ll be stuck with. Your other magic will dissipate. You

can choose Tendira, shortly after mating, and pay the price physically, or you can keep your barrier and shifter magic.”

The Queen and Omen walked away from us, leaving us to figure out what to do for ourselves and our world as if they weren't even a part of it anymore.



30

We retreated to Jalvo's house to decide what our next move was. Everyone crashed as soon as we made it back, taking full advantage of Jalvo's massive house and all its spare rooms. Keena and Tomo—whose lalidros were officially bigger than I'd ever seen them before—continued keeping an eye on things while we caught up on sleep.

After Tuslan and I woke up, we showered together and then met everyone down in the kitchen.

It was odd to see another house with a kitchen, but odd in a good way. It was kind of nice not to be the only sort-of-human.

Although, that had technically already changed for me. And it would likely change for Jalvo's mate after I reconnected her to the many beast forms she had within, though hers were all much, much smaller than mine. The longer a shifter went without shifting, the more difference there was in the magic of the different forms residing at their center, and Eela had gone a long, long time without ever shifting.

Ellery brought Eela a plate of food after Tuslan and I made breakfast for everyone (even though it was past lunch time). My ex-guard wanted to catch up with one of her ex-Queens, and I understood that. She'd watched the other woman grow up, after all. And Eela was one of the few lucky ones who wasn't mated to an abusive bastard, so hopefully she and Ellery could still enjoy each other's company.

Me and Tuslan sat down with Paik, Keena, and Tomo while we ate. When the plates were emptied and stacked to the side of the table, Ellery had returned, with Eela and Jalvo too.

Their plates added to the stack before they sat down too.

“So, what’s the plan, Boss?” Keena asked with a grin, looking at Tuslan.

He and I had still never gotten around to discussing the murder of the Tidal leaders, but now that I’d seen what they’d done to the original Queen and to Eela, I was starting to understand why they wanted to wipe out the leadership and begin fresh.

“We need to remove the Tidal Pack from Tendira completely,” Tuslan said.

Most of the other shifters growled their approval; me and Eela were the only ones who didn’t, actually.

He looked at me, and I both saw and felt his regret.

We should’ve made time to talk about it, but we would later. And I’d understand.

“Keena, Tomo, Ellery, and Paik will take a few of Jalvo’s Lead Wolves back into the valley and cleanse the pack’s leadership by any means necessary while Mesa and I fly to Siren Lake. There, she’ll use Tendira’s magic to bind the rest of the shifters to Soul Mountain. That’ll be the last time she uses Tendira’s power.” His gaze lingered on me, and I bobbed my head once.

When this was over, I'd be a shifter with barrier magic—no creation power for me.

“You all will make sure Reme, the Valley Alpha, returns to his land swiftly. You'll help him retake his pack, and ensure he gives the ex-Tidals a chance to join the Valley Pack. If they'd prefer, they could come to Blood, or Pine, if Jalvo agrees.”

Jalvo scowled. “After what they helped their Alpha do to my pack, I won't take the Tidals. They can join the damned Lava Pack or suffer their way into the Fringe if they refuse to stay in Valley or go to Blood.”

I wasn't sure how I felt about the Lava or Fringe Pack growing, but that wasn't what I really needed to worry about in the moment.

“I'll be absorbing the remainder of the Faction Pack soon anyway.” Jalvo's scowl deepened. “The Faction Pack. Who could possibly think that's a good idea? When has having multiple Alphas ever worked?”

“It doesn't,” Tuslan agreed. “It's a sinking ship, but one I think we should let sink on its own.”

Jalvo nodded.

We discussed a few semantics before we all decided that it was pointless to sit around talking any longer... and then, we parted ways.

I sat at the base of Tuslan's dragon neck, my grip on him much looser than it had ever been before. With my wings tucked

just within my human body, I knew I could catch myself if I fell, so I simply relished the feeling of the wind on my face.

Tuslan was flying us so I could conserve energy, and though the stress-ball was back in my lower belly, the steady beat of Tuslan's heart in my abdomen helped calm my worried soul.

We landed on the edge of Siren Lake after a few hours in the sky, and before I could wade into the semi-clean water, Tuslan's arms snaked around my waist.

"This is it," he said, his serious gaze locked with mine. "It could cost you a lot of magic, Blue."

"Someone's got to sacrifice it. Might as well be me." I gave him a tiny smile, knowing he could feel the stress in my middle. "I could use a shot of flaming courage, though."

His lips pulled up in a smirk, and his hand cupped the back of my neck before it caught on fire. I relaxed into his chest, embracing the blissfully-numbing effects of his fire for just a few seconds.

He withdrew the flames before it could affect me too much, and pressed a kiss to the top of my head. "Do you want me in the water with you?"

"Yes."

What I was going to have to do would be done alone, but that didn't mean Tuslan couldn't wrap his big leviathan body around me or hold me in his arms while I wrestled with the creation magic that I now knew was parasitic.

We stripped off our pants and waded out into the lake together, gripping each other's palms.

"The number of forms you possess won't change my feelings for you," Tuslan murmured to me as we settled waist-deep in the chilly water.

Waist-deep for me, at least.

"I know." It wouldn't change my feelings for me, either. Simply being able to fly for what little time I'd had was enough for me.

I hoped I could retain at least one of my new forms, but I'd be fine without them. My lifeline would bind to Tuslan's when we mated, and his magic would be split between us even if I had nothing left to contribute to the pairing. Though part of me worried how he'd take that, deep down, I knew it wouldn't affect anything.

Tuslan would be just as interested in me if he was a three-form or a four-form shifter, too.

I didn't want to weaken him, of course, but there were bigger things to worry about.

Closing my eyes for a moment, I let everything fall away. My worries, my fears, my reluctance... everything.

Letting out a slow breath, I opened my eyes and reached for Tendira's power.

Now that I saw it for what it was, for its hunger for magic and its resistance to being used, it was as smooth as water in my

hands.

When I pushed the power out around me, sliding it over all of Tendira, I caught it on all of the shifter life-forces on the continent. Big and small, bright and dark, thick and thin... the magic coated everyone, and everything.

Holding the magic in place felt like holding a grown man up in the air above my head. I knew it could come crashing down on me and do some real damage, but I held it with everything I had as I channeled Soul Mountain.

The mountain's magic flared to life, and I connected the ancient power flowing through her to every one of the shifter lifeforces on the continent.

Halfway done.

Tapping into the mountain's power, I slowly forced my will into the creation magic.

I felt it, then—the gentle pull on that sensitive part of me that housed all of my forms. It was quiet, and slow to the point that I hadn't noticed it before.

But in my exhaustion, then I recognized it. Tendira leeching away my magic.

I needed to hurry, because the longer it took me, the less *me* there would be when everything was said and done.

Wrestling the mountain's power to do what I wanted—to connect the shifters' beast and human forms the way they were meant to be connected—took more energy than I had left.

Tuslan's energy surged inside me, though, flooding me with the strength I needed to tie the shifters back to their own forms.

I withdrew as soon as it was done, and watched the massive column of magic that was Soul Mountain begin to move and grow with the change to her power. Though I couldn't see her in person, I felt her change.

As Tendira's magic solidified, holding all of the shifters to the land, binding them to its soul, the gold at the tip of the mountain seeped downward, and downward, and downward until the entire, massive rock form was made of a solid, magical gold that no one would ever be able to touch again.

The shifters were secured, and the magic was settled.

Finally, it was over.

I let go of Tendira's magic entirely, watching the vibrant power disappear back into the world around me with every blink of my eyes.

My knees shook, but Tuslan's arms were around my waist, holding me steady.

"It's done," I whispered.

"I know, Blue. You did good." His lips met my forehead as my body swayed.

"Can you feel if my magic's gone?" I asked him, my mind getting a bit fuzzy.

Beasts, I was exhausted.

“No, I can’t. But I couldn’t feel it before, either.” He carefully lifted me up off the ground, cradling me in his arms. More of his energy swirled between our bond.

“It’s over,” I murmured.

He didn’t seem to mind the repetition. “It is. And now, I’m taking you home.”

My lips curved up in a small smile.

Tuslan shifted forms, slipping me over the back of his dragon’s form, and my eyes closed as my body draped around his neck, holding on just tightly enough to stay upright.

I don’t remember reaching our house back on the Blood Land, or curling up in bed with my almost-mate.



31

Days passed as I slept, my body trying to recover from whatever trauma I'd put it through when I anchored the shifters to the mountain.

And dammit, I'd been right about the name for it the first time. Gold Mountain fit it much better than Tuslan had thought.

I woke up with my body wrapped around a pillow that smelled like Tuslan. My hair was plastered to my sweaty back, and some of it even felt trapped in one of my armpits.

It felt like I'd been asleep for a month, though I doubted that was the case. Tuslan would've figured out a way to wake me up long before that much time passed.

There was a book on the nightstand that I hadn't seen him reading before, so I knew he'd been sitting with me recently.

Hushed voices on the porch caught my attention. I never would've heard them with my human ears, which was a good sign that I hopefully hadn't lost all of my shifter forms to Tendira and her damn carnivorous magic.

Whatever Tuslan was talking about outside, and whoever he was talking to, could wait.

I needed to figure out what the damage was before I went outside, because I was certain that my mate would want to know.

Slipping into the closet, I stepped to the back of the slim room and sat down on my ass up against the clothes. On second thought, I should've just gone for the bathroom and turned on the tub for some privacy. Though, that would let Tuslan know I was awake, and he might come looking for me. When he did, I wanted to have an answer for him.

Focusing inward, I didn't let myself touch Tendira's magic, as I was inclined to do after so many weeks of that. Instead, I relied on my own creation power—my barrier magic—and slipped into the place within me that held all of my forms.

My heart pounded when I saw how different it looked.

Before, there had been twelve forms. Many were small and unused, but they were all there.

Tendira had cut that number in half. Whether it had happened in the days leading up to the final anchoring of the souls, or if it had all happened once when I'd been so exposed to such a high amount of Tendira's magic at once, I didn't know. But it was done.

And six... was still a damned lot of forms. More than I needed, that was for sure.

I let my mind wash over them, checking them all.

Human.

Phoenix.

Leviathan.

Wolf.

Dragon.

And...

Kitsune?

Dammit, Alyx had been right about that one after all.

I wasn't surprised by the first five, since they matched Tuslan's. With the constant flow of his magic over me, it made sense that those were the strongest beast forms I'd possessed. The kitsune one, though, must've been all me, because for the life of me, I couldn't see Tuslan with a single kitsune-like trait.

The door opened and closed, and I immediately felt Tuslan's alarm through the bond in my abdomen. That, at least, didn't feel any weaker.

"Mesa?"

"In the closet," I called back.

Relief whisked away the alarm in a moment, and I could breathe again.

The closet door opened, and my mate's worried gaze swept up and down my folded-up body. "Why are you hiding in the closet?"

"I wanted to check out the damage to my magic before you realized I was up." I shrugged.

Tuslan covered the distance between us in two steps and kneeled in front of me, his hands landing on my thighs.

"It doesn't matter to me how much power you have, Mesa. You're mine, even if—"

"I still have six forms." I interrupted him. No reason to let him worry longer than he needed to, after all. "All the same ones you have, plus a kitsune form."

I glanced down at my arms and found my barrier magic still rolling over my skin, the way it was supposed to be. Since Tendira's magic affected my barrier power so strongly, I wasn't surprised that it hadn't gone for my barrier power while there were still shifter forms it could consume without a fight.

"And my barrier magic is fine, too. I—Oh," I said the last word into Tuslan's mouth as he captured my lips. His tongue met mine, and he pulled me up onto his lap so I straddled him while we made out.

His fingers were gentle on my hips, and ass, and back. I was wearing a soft, golden sleep bandeau I recognized as mine from the castle, and a pair of shorts that went with it.

When he pulled away, I was a bit out of breath.

“What was that for?”

“I missed you,” he said simply, kissing my lips one last time before wrapping me tightly in his arms.

“Did my magic work?” I asked, suddenly uncertain. “Is everything okay?”

“It’s perfect.” His chin rested on my head. “You’ve been asleep for about a week, though.”

My eyebrows shot upward. “An entire week?”

“Yes. It’s a good thing you’re a shifter now, or I’d have needed to figure out a way to wake you up and force food down your throat.”

No kidding. “What happened with the Tidal Pack?”

“Most of them stayed in Valley after we took out their leaders. They seem to want to put everything behind them, same as the rest of us.”

Damn. That was good, though, I guessed.

“What about the Faction Pack?” I still felt some responsibility for them, since their change in leadership was somewhat my fault.

“Already ripped itself to shreds. Most of the leaders killed each other while they were savage.”

My heart dropped into my stomach. “Zeva?”

“Your obnoxious guard is still alive.” He gave me a dry look. “She arrived yesterday with the first group of her people looking to join our pack. Already asked to be made a Lead Wolf.”

“Tell me you turned her down.”

Tuslan chuckled. “Of course I turned her down. She’s absolutely insane, and she won’t stop hitting on me.”

Fury tore through me, and my stomach clenched as my fingers dug into Tuslan’s shoulders.

What the hell was that?

“Your wolf side says hello,” Tuslan flashed me a smirk, tickling my side.

I laughed and moaned at the same time, because damn, it hurt.

“The possessiveness is physical for a wolf. Your body won’t deal well with other women trying to claim me, in any way. But luckily for you, you’re going to mate with me today.” He tickled my side again, and I arched away from him again, my breathing picking up as I wrestled him off.

He pinned me to the ground easily, our bodies awkwardly trapped between us as we grinned at each other. “Luckily for me, huh?” I teased.

“Oh, yes. You should see the line of tear-streaked women,” he drawled. “It’s impressive.”

Another bout of the painful possessiveness clenched my stomach, and I cried out in pain.

“Bite me.” He tapped his shoulder, not having a problem holding up his weight with one arm. “Mark me, and it’ll feel better.”

“That’s ridicule—ow, fine.” I grabbed him by the shoulders.

The same way my wings and fins had known what to do in my leviathan and phoenix forms, my teeth lengthened as they neared Tuslan.

That was pretty damn cool, but that thought was whisked away when my teeth slid easily into his skin.

The sensation was gross, but also... erotic.

Pure, carnal pleasure tore through me, relaxing my body as the satisfaction of Tuslan wearing my mark settled the possessive beast within me.

My mate’s groan and the erection digging into my hip told me he’d liked it—a lot.

I tuned into his emotions—and surprisingly enough, found him near an orgasm.

Just from my teeth?

Weird, but cool.

I slipped my hand in his pants, and let my magic stroke his skin with me.

A snarl escaped him as he went over the edge, throbbing in my hand as his pants dampened against my bare hip.

His breathing was ragged, his eyes wild and surprised. “Shit, Mesa.”

“Didn’t you say something along the lines of a wolf’s venom being made to bring their mate pleasure?” I teased him, slowly releasing his erection and slipping my hand out of his pants.

“Yes, but... you just seem to catch me off guard, every damn time. I should be used to it by now.”

“Nah. I like surprising you; it evens the playing field between us. You can be the steady one.”

He gave me one of those genuine smiles that just melted me into a damn puddle.

“Did you say we’re getting mated today? How did you know I’d wake up on time?” I checked.

His lips curved up in a smirk. “Everything’s been ready since the day we got back. I’ve just been having them prepare as if it’s the day you’ll wake up every morning.”

I laughed. “You’re terrible.”

“In the best ways, yes.” He stood up, offering me his hand. “Come shower with me, so I can return the favor?”

My eyes dipped to the damp tent in his pants.

“Beasts, yes.”

We slipped away to the bathroom, and Tuslan proved just how much he'd missed me.

A few hours later, I swept makeup over my eyelids, making them shimmer, while the other girls teased each other about their relationships.

Turns out, the near-end of Tendira had pretty much worked as far as softening them to the idea of taking mates.

Keena's abdomen was already covered in a sprawling golden lalidro, her typical devilish grin tainted with something I could only call pure happiness.

She and Tomo had completed their Amra a few nights earlier, with only the beasts above and below as witnesses, and apparently, they'd both been grinning ever since.

It was freaking adorable.

I was sure they'd get back around to fighting at some point, but as Alyx pointed out to me at one point, for a powerful couple, fighting was pretty much just foreplay.

Paik and Ellery were still taking things slow, but she now had an inky lalidro on her abdomen that couldn't be ignored, and a permanent half-smile of her own.

Alyx and Dovu also had inky lalidros, but she was being very cautious about taking it any further. Dovu seemed more than content to just hang around, treating her better than a damned Queen though (at least, the ones in Cina's castle), until she was ready for more.

The girls were teasing each other, and leaving me to get myself ready, as I'd wanted to. I was excited to make my relationship with Tuslan permanent, but there were still a lot of things we needed to figure out. And that was a bit stressful.

The door opened a crack, and Keena caught it before it could open all the way. "No men!" she yelled at whoever was on the other side of the door.

"Just give this to her," Tuslan called back, sticking an envelope through the crack.

Keena snagged it from him, then slammed the door in his face.

She passed the envelope down the line of women, and it reached me last.

I set it on the counter while I finished lining my eyes, and then darkened and lengthened my eyelashes. My appearance had changed a little with both of my new forms, my body growing leaner and stronger thanks to everything we'd been up to as well as the shifter genes I'd activated by shifting.

Reta was still finishing altering the amra outfit to fit my changing body, but she'd be done before I met Tuslan at the altar.

Traditionally, an Amra was performed with both shifters on their knees, wherever they decided to do it. The fancier ceremonies had cushioned altars, and heaps of flowers, and a feast for all of the guests. There was no officiator as the couple made their promises to each other, with the beasts above and below as the only required witnesses.

I'd always assumed I'd be mated immediately following my desedra; I never imagined the most intimate moments of my life would be shared with thousands of pack members, most of which I didn't know.

The thought was daunting, to say the least.

But Tuslan had planned it, and I was sure he wanted it to be memorable. So I'd survive it.

Particularly because it meant he'd be mine forever.

Setting the makeup down on the bathroom counter, I took in my reflection. I hadn't bothered putting anything on my shifter-smooth skin, but my eyes sparkled. They churned like the sea; I was pretty sure I'd managed to activate my wolf form or whatever when I bit Tuslan earlier, because they certainly changed faster than they had before. My eyes looked like an ocean, and... I loved them.

But it was still hard to associate them with me.

And when we mated, they'd be Tuslan's, too. It would be odd to look at him and see my own eyes, but that was just another thing that would connect us. And so far, we didn't have a single connection that I didn't love.

“Alright, let’s give Mesa a minute to use the facilities,” Alyx said, ushering Ellery and Keena out of the bathroom. She winked at me over her shoulder, and gratitude flooded me.

She and the other ladies just understood.

Grabbing the envelope Tuslan had delivered, I sat on the edge of the bathtub in my silk robe and opened it up.

Inside, I found a thick piece of white stationary, with a curling golden pattern around the edges, leaving the middle open for the note Tuslan had written.

It read:

Mesa,

I loved you as you were when we met.

I love you more as you are now.

And I vow to love you more with every passing day.

Your body, hair, eyes, and clothes may change; the things that you love and hate probably will, too. But I promise to love every version of you, in this life and the next.

Yours Forever,

Red

Tears flooded my eyes and overflowed down my cheeks.

I wiped them away with the backs of my hands, and when those grew too wet, attempted to mop them up with my silky robe.

When they finally started to slow, I was clutching a hand-towel to my chest, dabbing at my eyes in an attempt to save the makeup that was probably all over my face.

Beasts, I loved him.

If he wanted to complete our Amra in front of the whole damned Blood Pack, that's what we would do.



32

I strode down the golden aisle left open for me. It was really insanely long, and on either side, it was packed with people. Some were whispering, some were silent, but thanks to the musicians playing up at the front of the crowd, I couldn't really hear what anyone was saying.

The crowds were washed in a nearly-equal mixture of black and gold. The sight of it made my throat catch, not because of the colors, but because of what they represented. Me and Tuslan, combining our lives.

My almost-mate waited at the end of the aisle. Our friends were all spread out along the front row, but I didn't see them.

I only saw him.

Tuslan wore a pair of plain, shimmering gold pants, and around his biceps, there was a set of matching love burns the size of my hands.

My face flushed.

Beasts. I must've done that by accident while we were in the shower.

Whoops.

The grin on his face told me exactly how he felt about my reaction—but the emotions in my abdomen did too.

I loved our connection.

I met him at the front of the group, and he took my hand in his. Without pause, he led me inside a large, golden tent.

The canvas walls shut, and I looked around us. Pillows, chairs, and couches littered the area, most gold, but a few black. All of them were empty.

“I’m confused,” I told Tuslan, still checking the tent out. It was decorated beautifully, but for what?

“Everyone wants to meet you. They can, after I’ve made you mine in private.” His lips curved up in a boyish smile. “What do you say?”

“Beasts, yes.” I let out the breath I’d been holding.

This was much, much better than I’d been imagining since I heard he was turning it into a celebration.

Hell, maybe it was even perfect.

Tuslan led me over to a set of thick pillows, and we each knelt on one. Our knees met at the center, and our hands remained connected between us.

There, in that tent, surrounded by people but still somehow in private, Tuslan and I connected our lives and magic

permanently.

And when we said the final words, I watched the darkness in his eyes lighten to the same churning blue I'd seen staring back at me in the mirror.

I had never imagined it would look and feel so *right*.

Hand-in-hand, we made our way back to the tent's opening, and introduced ourselves to the world. Not as the Blood Alpha and the Shifter Queen, but as mates.



Epilogue

Tuslan

8 years later

My hand swept slowly over the curve of Mesa's belly, feeling the babies moving within her body.

Twins were a miracle that only ever survived a Tendira childbirth with a phoenix around, but considering we had two, I wasn't worried. Just incredibly grateful that by some stroke of luck, I'd been given not just a mate, but children too.

My eyes traced over Mesa's face. She was completely exhausted, but despite the messy hair and the lines beneath her eyes, she had never looked more beautiful to me. Though shifter twins were a miracle, they were an extremely taxing one, even for my fiery six-form shifter.

"You're staring at me again," she murmured, stretching her arms and legs out in front of her with a soft groan. "Beasts, why can't your fire heal pregnancy pains without drugging our babies?"

I chuckled softly. We didn't know if the flames would truly affect the children, but we weren't willing to risk it, and eight months without my fire was taking a toll on my mate.

“What’s this?” She stretched across the bed, trying to reach the wrapped present I’d left on her nightstand, and failed.

I couldn’t help but grin as she collapsed back to the bed with another groan. “How much longer?”

“Not much. They’ll be here soon.” My hand slid over the curve of her belly again.

I’d hardly been able to walk away from her since she’d been pregnant, and feeling the new shape of her was addictive. Feeling the babies wrestling was almost equally irresistible.

I lifted my hand off her belly long enough to grab the present I’d brought her. Despite her dragon form, she still wasn’t one who collected treasure in a typical way. Her main treasure, those days, was her growing personal library, her bathtub, and me.

Which made me really damn happy.

Beasts, I was a lucky man.

She unwrapped the present carefully, probably knowing it was a book already.

When the paper was off, she held it backward, so she flipped it around and looked at the cover. It took her a moment to realize what the book was from.

“Is this... one of the first books you gave me, when I was pretending to be a shifter?” she asked, staring down at it. She flipped open the cover, and found the water-streaked pages. They’d dried wavy after she cried over them, that day I’d left it for her. I’d left others too, of course, but I’d made sure they

were all action books because even then, I'd been able to tell she'd prefer romance.

Remaining outside while she cried and read it had been more painful than I'd ever expected, and I'd held on to the book ever since. With her tears staining the pages, it had become something of a treasure. I'd never given it back to her, because the dragon in me couldn't bare to part with it.

Her fingers brushed over the wavy indents in the pages. "Beasts, I sobbed that night," she murmured. Her gaze lifted to mine, and her eyes were rimmed with tears. She cried much easier, since she'd been pregnant. As much as her tears pained me, I treasured the strong emotions my mate felt. She lived so vibrantly that it inspired me to do the same. "Thanks, Red."

Her lips met mine, and I kissed her softly. Not because she was delicate, but because I wanted to cherish the moment we shared.

"You're not going to forget about me when there are cute babies to hold, right?" she asked, and though her expression was teasing, I could see a layer of vulnerability behind it.

My female was the most intriguing blend of confident and insecure, and though her insecurity had hurt me in the past, I understood her too well to be hurt by it after the years we'd spent together. Mesa was still young enough to be learning that change was the only true constant in any person's life, so changes could be difficult for her.

"Who do you think these cute babies will resemble, Mesa?" I brushed hair off her face. "Who do you think I'll see every time I look into their eyes?"

“Yourself, probably,” she grumbled. “Kobey’s nearly an exact replica as Tomo; he doesn’t have a damned one of Keena’s features, and given that he’s already six, it’s safe to assume that he never will.”

I laughed. “Blue.”

She rolled her eyes, but her lips quirked upward in a hint of a smile. She knew where I was going with this.

“You’ll see me every time you look at them?” She asked.

“Yes. You’re the one who grew them, who suffered for them, who loved them first.” My hand slid over her abdomen again; I just couldn’t resist. The way our lalidro spread over her rounded stomach was far sexier than I’d ever imagined it could be.

She blinked away more tears. “You’ve loved them as long as I have.”

“You realized a few hours before you told me; that puts you at a few hours more love than I have.”

She snorted, but grinned, wiping away tears with the back of her hand. “Your logic is ridiculous.”

“Ridiculously amazing? Yes.” I kissed her on the lips. “The babies will change things, for the next twenty years or so, but it will still be you and me. We’ll just have two children to spoil and annoy and tease and love on top of what we already have.”

She nodded. “I guess that’s true.”

“I know it’s true.” I kissed her again, stroking her abdomen once more. “Blood Queen.”

She rolled her eyes, swatting at my hand which I’d curled possessively over her stomach in case she tried to get rid of it.

She hadn’t let anyone but me call her Queen in years. Mesa had settled quickly and firmly into her place as my second. What she lacked in violent tendencies, she made up for in compassion, and where I lacked compassion, she made up for it with mercy.

Our pack had overtaken the rest in numbers, and we were growing like a weed.

When I’d built the Blood Pack, I had done it for the misfits of Tendira. Those who didn’t belong in the packs they’d been born into, and those who wanted to run away. Since I established it, it had been that.

But thanks to my mate, in the past few years, it had become so much more.

It was a refuge for the broken, a place you could go to embrace the person you wanted to be. It was a fresh start for those who had suffered, and a safe place for anyone who needed something *more*.

We were no longer known as the most violent pack, though we could certainly be violent when the moment called for it.

We weren’t just a pack anymore; we were a support system. A family.

“I love you, Tuslan,” she said suddenly, as she opened the book I’d re-gifted her.

“I love you too.” I kissed her cheek, her arm, and her belly.

Life couldn’t have been any better.



AFTERTHOUGHTS

I'm sitting here, trying to come up with words to describe everything this trilogy was to me. It's 7 AM, and I haven't slept more than five hours in the last three days combined because I've been so behind, but it's done!

Fantasy books are a lot of things. Fun, exciting, wild. It's always a risk, because sometimes it's hard to know if things that make sense in your head will make sense to someone else. But I guess that's part of the fun.

I love Mesa and Tuslan together. I love their friendship, and their playfulness.

Mostly, though, I love the hope that seemed to leak through every moment of the series. Mesa wasn't a lucky person. She didn't have a simple life. Nothing ever really seemed to go her way... yet she never lost hope, or gave up, or stopped fighting.

So at the end of this story, I guess all I really have to say is that I want to be more like Mesa. And I hope maybe you do too. Because no matter how dark life gets, the sun always rises and life always goes on.

Thank you so very much for reading.

-Lola Glass



PLEASE LEAVE A REVIEW

Here it is. The awkward page at the end of the book where the author begs you to leave a review.

Believe me, I hate it more than you do.

But, this is me swallowing my pride and asking.

Whether you loved or hated this story, you made it this far, so please review! Your reviews play a MASSIVE role in determining whether others read my books, and ultimately, writing is a job for me—even if it's the best job ever—so I write what people are reading.

Regardless of whether you do or not, thank you so much for reading <3

-Lola



BOOKS BY LOLA GLASS:

SACRIFICED TO THE FAE KING:

FORCED TO BE QUEEN (Dec 27th 2021)

BOUND TO BE HUMAN (Jan 19th 2022)

COMPELLED TO BE FAE (Feb 4th 2022)

SHIFTER QUEEN:

[SOUL OF THE PACK](#)

[PILLAR OF THE WOLVES](#)

[ANCHOR OF THE BEASTS](#)

FINISHED TRILOGY

REJECTED MATE REFUGE:

[WOLF TAMER](#)

[WOLF CHARMER](#)

[WOLF WHISPERER](#)

[CHOSEN MATE](#)

MATE TRACKER

SPIRIT WOLF

WICKED PACK

FINISHED SERIES

MATE HUNT STANDALONES:

THROWN TO THE WOLVES

SHIFTER CITY:

RUBY WOLF

RUBY ALPHA

RUBY MATE

FINISHED TRILOGY

WOLFSBANE:

RUNNING FROM THE WOLVES

RUNNING BESIDE THE ALPHA

RUNNING WITH THE PACK

RUNNING FROM MY MATE

(JAMIE'S NOVELLA)

RUNNING TO MY WOLF

(LONDON'S NOVELLA)

FINISHED SERIES

SUPERNATURAL UNDERWORLD:

A SEER AMONG SHIFTERS

AN ORACLE AMONG HOUNDS

FINISHED DUOLOGY



Check out my reader group, [Lola's Book Lovers](#)

for giveaways, book recommendations,
and more!

Or find me on:

[ETSY](#)

[INSTAGRAM](#)

[PINTEREST](#)

[GOODREADS](#)



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Teller of stories. Wrangler of children. Buyer of Chinese food. Creator of art. Lover of life.

If that's too vague for you, Lola is a twenty-something with a **slight** werewolf obsession and a passion for love—real love. Not the flowers-and-chocolates kind of love, but the kind where two people build a relationship strong enough to last. That's the kind of relationship she loves to read about, and the kind she tries to portray in her books.

Even if they're about shifters :)