



ETHAN SHAW

**APEX**  
III: PRICE OF DOMINION  
**ACADEMY**

# PRICE OF DOMINION

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APEX ACADEMY

BOOK 3

ETHAN SHAW

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## LYCAON'S CURSE

...Terror struck

he took to flight, and on the silent plains  
is howling in his vain attempts to speak;  
he raves and rages and his greedy jaws,  
desiring their accustomed slaughter, turn  
against the sheep—still eager for their blood.

His vesture separates in shaggy hair,  
his arms are changed to legs; and as a wolf  
he has the same grey locks, the same hard face the same bright  
eyes, the same ferocious look.

- *Ovid's Metamorphosis*

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Chapter 34

Ethan Shaw Author



Despite the fact that the announcement about lifting the ban on delta shifters taking mates was long over, no one had quite gotten the auditorium cleared out. People were gathered around the edges of the room in small groups, talking back and forth in hushed voices, glancing towards me. I could feel the weight of their gazes on my neck, but this time, I wasn't worried about it.

There was no quailing away, no backing out of the room, and no reason for me to doubt myself. I had managed to find a foothold in the world of the shifters as well as maintain my own humanity—something that, for a while, I had been worrying I would lose to my primal heart.

Monty had already vanished in search of Coriander, but I was still rooted to the podium. It felt like everyone else should have been allowed to clear out first. With such a big change having just taken place, I had to stay and show everyone that I was willing to defend my stance without fear of challenge.

For a while, it appeared that people were keeping their distance. Then Davis Thompson started towards me.

He was tall and lean like most of the lynx shifters, and his silver hair was almost always gelled up into spikes. After Jakarta had died—after I had killed him, ripped his throat out with my fangs, felt his last dying breath on my face—Davis had taken on the position of lynx alpha.

We had fought, after Jak.



They had been friends. I didn't blame him, but I bristled up anyway, not sure how close to a fight this was going to end up.

"Victor," said Davis with a bob of his head. "That was... something."

"It was a long time coming," I told him. "You got a problem with my call, Davis?"

Davis paused, hesitation on his face... and then shook his head. "I have a delta cousin. So, no. I'm good with it."

Shifter hierarchy was a difficult thing for people from the outside world to comprehend. Everyone had their own shift, and within that shifting, there were set ranks. Alphas were the highest-ranking, not counting my position: Head of the whole House Blackstone, the prime alpha.

The alphas were the top males. There was only one alpha per shifter type. The beta males often challenged the alpha, so there was much infighting among the groups. If they won, there would be a power shift. The beta would become the new alpha and, well, the alpha would probably be dead.

The alpha's job was to maintain order. Sometimes there were two alphas, but only if one of them had leveled up higher, taking on the ranking of prime general—like Monty and Remmy, the two men I had so far selected to stand at my side, help enforce my decisions, and keep me safe.

Many betas were strong enough to challenge the alpha, and if one succeeded, they would become more powerful as their hormones adjusted to the new rank. Male and female shifters could be betas, but they could only breed with other betas or omegas.

And then there were the omegas and the deltas. The omegas were more beautiful, more powerful, more fertile, and able to pass on better genes. Any omega that I didn't claim for myself was free game for the other alphas. But there was a certain level of respect for all three of those shifter sects. It was only the delta, I had learned, that was often looked down on with a sort of unending scorn.

Deltas were weaker, and they were forbidden to breed at all because of that. Many of the old-school shifters saw the deltas as a subservient sect. Toys and fighters, more than anything.

And not even an hour ago, I had changed that.

No longer would the deltas be at the bottom of the barrel.

While I couldn't change the fact that they were physically and magically weaker than the other rankings, I could give them more rights and more protection. The ability to take mates, the allowance to have children, and the right to be treated with the same fairness that everyone else at Apex Academy, the most renowned school for shifters in all of North America, was treated with.

It was the first official ruling that I had made as the prime alpha for House Blackstone.

I had *seriously* been expecting Davis to be pissed over it. His admission of having a delta cousin took a bit of wind out of my sails.

“That’s a relief to hear, actually...” I paused. “If that isn’t it, then what? This about Jak—about what went down between us?”

Davis blinked, then widened his eyes slightly before quickly dropping them to the floor as he practically deflated. “What happened before...” He took a breath and finally met my eyes once again. “It wasn’t because you’re the prime, I swear. I wasn’t going *after you*—you know that, right?”

“Yeah, I know. You and Jak were friends. You were just backing your friend. I get that.” I sighed and let out a chuckle, but it was empty. “Hell, the one thing I can get behind in this new society I find myself in is the brotherhood of it all—of standing behind your pack.”

He nodded. “I also wanted you to know that I wasn’t involved with any of that mess with Prof—with Beaumont,” he quickly corrected. It seemed that I wasn’t the only one who didn’t think the man deserving of the title “professor”

anymore. “I wanted you to know for certain, I wasn’t mixed up in any of it. My loyalty is to House Blackstone.”

“Loyalty to Blackstone is a hell of a lot different from being loyal to me,” I countered. Though I didn’t actually intend to turn this into any sort of challenge, I just wanted to take my measure of Davis now that he wasn’t blinded by grief and rage.

He squared up and looked me dead in the eyes. “Not to me, it isn’t.”

*Well, it is to me... but that’s likely all I’m going to be able to get out of him. I did kill his best friend, after all; if it were me, there’s no way in hell that I’d be able to look Monty’s killer in the eye and swear fealty to them.*

*I should just take the win—however small it may be.*

After a moment, I snorted and shook my head, a smile tugging at my lips. “Alright. I understand.” Upon seeing the relief on his face, I continued, “And to be clear, I know you weren’t involved. We wouldn’t be speaking now if you were.”

After all, Beaumont had a list of names sealed away in his little box, and Davis’s wasn’t on it. Not to mention that Davis and Jak were like Monty and I, meaning they were usually within shouting distance of each other.

That Beaumont was jerking Jak around like a marionette wouldn’t have sat well with Davis. No way he would have backed Beaumont after he got Jak killed by challenging me.

Davis seemed relieved at my response, but it was clear there was something else on his mind. From the way his shoulders slumped, it was weighing heavily on him. Another problem in what seemed like a sea of them that kept crashing to shore.

*Just my fucking luck, right? Couldn’t catch a break even if it was dropped into my goddamn lap.*

Honestly, it felt like I’d been going nonstop since I arrived at this school. One thing after another without fail. Was it too much to ask for a break?

Just five minutes. That's all I was asking for.

Davis, seemingly finding his resolve, let out a breath. "There's something else I wanted to talk to you about as well."

"Of course there is." I had to resist the urge to growl as my more primal side grew bored of Davis and his hedging, roundabout way of speaking his mind. I wanted him to spit it out and then get the fuck out of my sight.

But that was the side I was doing my damndest to control—or trying to, at the very least.

I had to resist the urge to bite my lip to keep my mouth shut. My teeth were sharp, and if I wasn't careful, I'd rip a chunk out of my own mouth.

However, as Davis opened his mouth, a voice rose through the auditorium.

"Victor!"

I turned to find Petra Haliday, my mate, rushing through the rows towards me.

Petra might not have been very tall, but she had a large chest to make up for it, long legs, and wide hips. She was wearing the female version of the same Academy uniform that I sported. Her skirt was barely long enough to cover her ass, dark blue, with black knee-highs that were ringed in silver. She had a black suit jacket over the top of her white, silky-looking blouse.

Her silver hair had been left long and pulled into a braid on the side of her head. She had a wine-colored birthmark on the back of her hand, and the tips of her painted nails looked incredibly sharp as she waved at me.

"Victor," she called again. "Come here, quickly!"

Her ears were pinned back flat against her hair, her brows pinched down, telling me something was very wrong.

I hopped down from the stage and took a few strides to meet her as she pushed through the fading crowd. As I reached her, I instinctively reached out to place a hand on her arm. "What's wrong?"

“Outside,” she said, slightly breathless. “By the front gate. You need to get out there.”

Unease twisted in my throat as my chest tightened. Petra was worried—I could smell it on her—and that, in turn, caused the hairs on the back of my neck to stand on end.

Another problem.

*Just great.*

“Hey,” I said softly, “it’s alright, I’m here. Can you tell me what’s going on? What are we dealing with?”

Petra shook her head, her eyes wide. “I didn’t get a good look through all the people, but something is going on, and from the tension in the air, it’s not good. I ran to find you as soon as I felt it.”

“Well, shit. Cass is going to be pissed at me for bailing on her.”

*And I was really, really looking forward to finally claiming her as my mate...* I let out an explosive breath, actually hoping this was trouble just so I could have an excuse to let off a little steam. Yet I quickly realized that was the prime in me. I shook my head, focusing on the task at hand.

Looking down at my lover, I nodded. “I need you to find Monty right away. He’s likely with Coriander, if you don’t pick up his scent first.”

She met my eyes and nodded. “I’ll bring him to you.”

With that, she took off, vanishing outside, and I started scanning the crowd. Though I quickly realized that the shifters who had been loitering around in the auditorium were all rushing outside too. Their friends were calling them, goading them into hurrying over.

“What about Remmy?” Davis asked from beside me, and in all honesty, I’d damn near forgotten about him in the wake of Petra’s bad news.

Just as he spoke, I found the shifter in question. “Over there,” I said with a jut of my chin.

Remmy was waiting for us by one of the doors, the same one that Petra had left through. Remmy was tall and lean, his silver hair worn short. His left ear seemed to be more metal than cartilage. I counted seven piercings down the side of it alone, glinting in the bright lights of the auditorium.

He was more reserved than some of the other lycans, and certainly less impulsive. While he wasn't well loved by the whole student body, he was clearly well respected among the lycans. And in the last week, he had become my second general, General of the Lycans, and proven himself to be a loyal ally during the Beaumont affair.

I went over to him with Davis trailing along behind me, looking a little uncertain. Only for a moment, though. Then something almost like determination flashed across his face.

“Any clue what’s going on?” I asked.

Remmy shook his head. “Your guess is as good as mine.” He then turned his nose up to the ceiling. “There’s a lot of fear in the air—or maybe uncertainty is the right scent... It’s hard to make out with so many people around.”

“Petra said something similar. But she didn’t know what either.”

“Then what are we doing standing around?” Remmy asked.

“We’re waiting.”

He just looked at me. “For?”

As if on cue, my nose picked out a familiar scent cutting through the auditorium. I smirked and motioned to the doors at the very back. “For that.”

There was Montague Blue, who was making his way through the crowd and heading towards me as though his life depended on it.

Most people, myself included, knew Montague as *Monty*. He was a massive guy even when he wasn't shifted. He was almost six foot five and built like a brick wall, with a solid chest, broad shoulders, and arms as big around as tree

branches. The guy was a beast, but he was pretty fun to hang around too. And he was the most loyal general that a prime alpha could have asked for.

The big bear kin shifter hurried towards us. “I was outside when Petra came and got me.” He nodded to the doors. “You need to come see this.”

“What’s going on?”

“Someone is coming up the drive.”

My eyes widened. “Aren’t there wards up around the property to stop that from happening?”

Apex Academy was hosted at a massive school out in the forests beyond the main city of New York. It was beautiful as fuck: old stone and marble buildings, rich mahogany. The kind of place that you took one look at and knew was run by old money. The forest stretched out around it, with wards carved into the trees and many of the paving stones to prevent normal humans from accidentally hiking into our territory.

Monty nodded. “That’s why everyone is freaking out. Whoever’s coming up here has managed to bypass all of the wards. This isn’t good, Victor.”

I nodded. “Understatement of the day, there, bud, I think.”

“Could it be someone from Beaumont’s family?” Davis asked, speaking up.

Beaumont had been working hand in hand with Mikel, the prime alpha of a different house, to try and usurp me—among other things. He was presently lying dead in the dining hall, along with Professor Balboa, one of the teachers who had been trying to help stop him.

Remmy turned and raised his eyebrows at Davis’s presence, seemingly more interested in what he was doing hanging around me than our nascent visitor. After a moment, he shrugged. “Could be—or could just as easily be any of a hundred other things.” He laughed, but it was cold. “Knowing our luck, though, I’d say whoever it is isn’t here to congratulate you on your new political reforms and tell you what a bang-up job you’re doing.”

I just stared at him, torn between knowing he was likely right and not wanting him to be.

“Yeah, I’d have to agree with you on that one.” I sighed and then nodded to the doors. “Alright, if we’re fucked regardless, no use standing around here with our pants around our ankles. Let’s go find out just how big of a stick they’re swinging.”

I quickly started walking, shouldering my way through the last of the students as they filed out of the auditorium, with my generals and, surprisingly, Davis behind me.

“You know, I’m not half-bad at rune magic,” Davis said. “If someone is just driving up here, they have to be pretty talented with sigils. They’d either have to have a lodestone key or a strong enough sigil to bypass our wards.”

I bit back a groan, the sound twisting into a growl inside of my chest. “Well, thanks for confirming they’re a legitimate threat, at least.”

The fact that this was happening so soon after Beaumont’s death, with his body barely cold, wasn’t a coincidence.

*Someone was waiting for this...*

As I pushed the doors open and stepped out into the midmorning sun, a thought occurred to me. “Where’s Hannah?”

“My dad has her,” Monty said. “You think she’s involved in this?”

“I think if anyone is going to know what’s going on, it’s her.” I paused. “Though, I can’t rule out that whoever is here might be here for her. Just keep an eye out for her—and your father too. I could use his advice.”

After a long moment pushing through the growing crowd of students, I spied a car coming up the winding driveway.

It was a cherry-red Firebird. It was polished to a shine, and sunlight rippled off the hood as the driver slowly approached. Whoever it was, they were taking their sweet-ass time, inching by at a crawl, as if they were here to simply take in the view.



I hated them instantly.

Beyond that, though, my instincts were telling me something dangerous was approaching. The scent of a predator was already in the air—and as I had long since learned, my instincts were seldom wrong.



The crowd parted around me as I approached the gate. Monty and Remmy were at my back, ready and willing to protect me but not weakening my position by grouping up around me. I stood tall, waiting out the driver. Davis lingered close by but with the others in the crowd, keeping well clear of the three of us.

His eyes drilled into my back, telling me that whatever he needed to talk about wasn't going away anytime soon. It was his bad luck that we'd been interrupted, as he had swiftly fallen on my list of priorities—more like my list of problems at this point.

Just one more in what seemed a never-ending fucking loop of them.

It appeared the driver was aware of my presence, as they slowed even further, each turn of their tires slower than the last, the individual blades of grass practically bending beneath the rubber. Whoever it was wanted me angry when they arrived.

They wanted me off balance.

And I very much wanted to give them what they wanted, but I forced myself to breathe in through my nose and out through my mouth to calm myself. Though it took a considerable amount of effort to remain stoic, I managed until the Firebird finally pulled up next to the fountain.

The engine cut off, and out from the car stepped a woman. She was clearly a shifter of some sort, though the bright purple

headscarf she was wearing covered her ears. It was tied under her chin in the style of an old movie star from the 1950s, paired with big, bulky sunglasses. The faintest trace of *lycan* curled over her skin, but it was fairly well hidden—not beneath a scent-covering spray, but what smelled like a metric ton of perfume.

Another deliberation, surely.

To weaken and obscure my senses.

*So, I don't smell her shifter type... No, it's not strong enough to stop that... So I don't smell who she's been around?*

That had to be it.

And with Beaumont dead, there was only one shifter who wanted to keep me off balance and unaware.

*Mikel.*

Everything about the woman made it look as though she'd come from a different era, from her bright red lipstick to her white leather jacket, straight down to the bright yellow Marilyn Monroe-style dress. She tipped her head down, using one finger to slide her sunglasses further down the crook of her nose.

“You are Victor, I presume?” she asked with a thick accent. Russian—or perhaps Ukrainian.

“I'm afraid you have me at a disadvantage,” I replied.

She smiled, and it was a vicious, predatory thing. “In more ways than one, I'm sure. I am Natasha.”

The name meant nothing to me. But letting her know that wasn't a good idea. She was looking for any crack or weakness to exploit. I could tell that much from the predator's stare she was giving me.

Thankfully, Remmy had my back on this one.

“Mikel's daughter?” he asked.

“Indeed.” She took off her sunglasses and tucked them into her jacket pocket.

Well, I wasn't quite expecting her to just come out and admit it.

*Huh, maybe I was wrong about the perfume? Maybe she just really likes smelling like a streetwalker. Whore-chic, as it were.*

*Knowing Mikel, I wouldn't put it past him to pimp out his daughter if it benefited him.*

I folded my arms across my chest. "Why are you here? Is Mikel still so afraid to face me head-on that he now sends his daughter in his stead?"

She froze, her face twisting with outrage that she swiftly tried to hide behind a mask of contempt. But even if it was for a second, she couldn't hide the rage in her eyes. Her shifter instincts were likely in an uproar at such a direct provocation.

"My father was promised certain belongings. I have come to collect them."

Mikel was the head of House Renoire, of Europe and Russia, though they were based in Austria. They had the most money out of any of the shifter houses. And while that didn't *always* mean anything, it certainly meant something to me. To try and claim anything from House Blackstone that they couldn't simply purchase for themselves—well, I didn't think she was here for the antiques.

Mikel and his fucking schemes had worn me to the quick and then some. House Renoire was the reason I had been having so many problems.

Beaumont. Jak. Cass being taken. Petra being stalked. More than that, it was becoming quite clear that Mikel was the reason my mother had fled from the shifter world. The reason that my father had been culled by someone in his own house, forcing me to come blind into a world that I knew nothing about but still expected me to lead it.

With a snarl, I stepped forward. The growl was unbidden. Unstoppable. "And just what the fuck do you think belongs to Mikel?"

Natasha stared me down with practiced disinterest. “Two women by the names of Petra and Cassandra. And—”

Instantly, my hackles raised, and I bared my teeth in pure fury. “Over your cold, lifeless body, bitch.”

She sighed. “And...” Lifting a finger, Natasha pointed to my chest. “And that necklace you are wearing.”

*Wait, what?*

*My necklace?*

That caught me off guard for a moment. I had only recently acquired this necklace. It had been in a box at my Uncle Aaron’s house, containing a slew of old photographs. That had been the first time I had ever seen it—and the first time I had been told that my mother hadn’t just been a human, but a shifter in her own right. Since then, my life had turned into nothing but a haze of mysteries, unanswered questions, and fights for survival.

I reached up, curling my fingers around it. “This was my mother’s.”

“No,” Natasha said. “That belongs to my father, and he wants it back. I have been instructed to collect it—and the girls. I’ve also been allowed to challenge you if necessary.”

“Yeah?” I took a step towards her. “And do you think it’s fucking necessary?”

Her eyes flashed in the sunlight, and for just a moment, she shifted, her face taking on a more bestial nature before shifting back in an instant. “I very much hope so, Victor. I very much hope so.”

To have such a level of control over her shift was impressive—and very clearly a threat. A threat and a challenge at the same time.

“It’s a shame you came all this way just to lose,” I said. “But if it’s a fight you want, I’m more than happy to oblige.”

Turning this into an official duel wasn’t something I could treat lightly. I would have no choice but to listen to her. The Academy wasn’t just a place for people to learn how to hunt

and fight in their shifted forms. It was also a place of history, law, and tradition.

Just as there was tradition in the way that a prime alpha had to act—in the number of mates he would take, the number of generals he needed to reach full power—there were traditions in everything else as well. The generals had to swear their oaths. The hierarchy had to be respected. And if someone challenged you under official circumstances, the challenge had to be met.

To ignore it would be seen as an act of cowardice.

Good thing I wasn't a coward.

Natasha strode forward and stopped a short distance from me before saying something in Russian.

I didn't need to understand the words to know that they were old and heavy. The corners of her lips pulled back into a smile, and she flashed her teeth at me. Once more, she shifted, her teeth sharpening into a set of vicious fangs.

"I challenge you, Victor Rawlings. In case that wasn't clear."

"It's plenty clear," I told her, unwavering. My voice was steady. Though there were nerves flitting about in my chest at the idea of facing someone so unknown, they didn't come across in my voice or the set of my expression. I was oozing confidence... and a steady, unwavering anger.

"Very well." She stepped past me towards the Academy. "Arrange me a room. We'll do this properly. I expect a decent bed, and an even better fight in the morning."

It seemed that, during our back and forth, Professor Richmond Blue had arrived. He stepped towards me. He was massive, almost seven foot and with the kind of broad shoulders that made it seem like he could knock someone down with a single flick of the finger. His hair was worn long and pulled into a bun at the base of his neck, starting to streak silver through the black of it. His eyes were a sharp, piercing blue. Massive claw scars ran over the curve of his face and down over the side of his neck. They vanished under his shirt,

a nice-looking white button down hidden beneath the suit jacket that served as the professor's uniform.

I gave him a nod in turn; we would host this woman and have this duel. He nodded back at me, just once, to show that he understood. Hannah, Mikel's wife, stood at his side.

Hannah was the only lion shifter I had ever seen. Tawny ears pushed out of long, straight golden-blonde hair. She had a black suit dress on, the skirt sliding down to her ankles. A lioness's tail pushed out of the back of it. Her hands were folded in front of her body, the tips of each finger just slightly paler than the rest of her golden-brown skin.

There was a certain softness to her features... and a certain worry to her expression. And beyond that, a glint of relief. Had she been expecting that Beaumont would bargain her away as well?

It was hard to tell. It didn't matter either. I would use this fight as a way to prove to Mikel, once and for all, that he wasn't going to be able to take the house away from me. *Or* any of my women.

This was the traditional manner in which the shifters handled their problems, and I would see it through.



Apex Academy was abuzz with curiosity. It was the kind of thick tension that had been lingering around the Academy since the day they realized I was the prime alpha. A small part of me had hoped that taking care of Beaumont would have been enough to fix things up, but that clearly hadn't been the case.

With Natasha tucked safely away in one of the rooms on the teacher's wing, everyone was free to make their own speculation. And I was free to do some much-needed research on the subject. There was a massive library on campus. It was about time that I took some serious advantage of it.

The library was located on the western Academy grounds. It was technically a separate building from the rest of the Academy. I figured it had been done that way so it could be continuously expanded over time without interfering with the layout of the main structure.

The inside was massive, with three floors that were filled up with bookshelves. Some of them were ancient tomes, with cracked leather on the bindings and faded engraved titles. Others were newer, freshly laminated pieces. The air smelled of leather, but it also smelled of the many students that had passed through the library over the course of the day.

The dark wood floors bled into dark walls and dark bookshelves.

It was an elegant place, but it was dark too. There were shadows to hide in, nooks to settle into, and plenty of places



where you could sit down and hide away. The very top floor had the oldest books on it. The middle floor had several rows of computers that could be used with the librarian's approval—and thinking about them reminded me that I hadn't gamed in what felt like a lifetime. Oliver had been bugging me to get back on, but with everything going on, there just hadn't been any time. The bottom floor housed a study area, which was filled up with comfortable-looking armchairs and several lounges.

And right there, waiting for me just past the librarian's desk, was Bree.

Her blue hair was almost mane-like in appearance, thick, a bush of it just unkempt enough to be sexy. A very 80s bedhead kind of vibe. Her ears were massive and furry, and her tail was a thick bush of a thing, sticking out from the bottom of her skirt. The bulk of her tail caused her skirt to hike up a little too high, showing off a flash of her panties anytime she bent over.

She was bubbly and a bit airheaded. She was also one of the top students at Apex Academy, but she simply didn't get some social cues. That hadn't stopped us from totally hitting it off. She wore her uniform fully unaltered, always wore midnight blue panties, and carried a very large patch-covered shoulder bag with her. The bag was always overflowing with books.

In her lycan form, she stood almost exclusively upright, with a long, shaggy "mane" of fur around her neck, throat, and chest, whereas the fur on her belly and arms was very short. She had fur in the shape of shaggy "leg warmers" between the knee and ankle, and a long, bushy tail.

Honestly, she was just as hot as a shifted lycan as she was a human woman. There was something about Bree that just *zinged* with me. She was fun, she was friendly, she was absolutely smoking—and she was the second mate I had taken, after Petra.

"There you are," she said cheerfully. Her ears twitched, her tail curling up behind her. "I was wondering when you were going to get here."

Even with everything going on, just the sight of Bree was enough to get me smiling. She was a special sort of woman, flirty and fun, and though I wasn't here for personal reasons today, I knew that the research session was going to go *much* smoother than it would have on my own.

And it was going to be a hell of a lot more fun too.

My mouth curled up into a grin, but I quickly bit it back when I caught sight of the clock hanging up on the wall behind her.

“You can't really blame me for sleeping in a little after the day I had, can you?”

Bree grinned at me, all sharp teeth and bright eyes. “I can... just a little.” The corners of her eyes squinted up just a little bit. She tilted her head to the side and said, “But perhaps I can be persuaded to forgive, just this once.”

I chuckled. “And what would the price of such magnanimity run me?”

Bree giggled, her eyes clear and deep enough to go swimming in as she batted her long lashes at me. “Oh, it's going to cost you, mister. You're not getting out of this cheap—I can promise you that.”

Our back and forth was the exact reason I loved spending time with her. It just flowed so naturally between us, and I couldn't help but edge closer to her. “Well, don't keep me in suspense.”

She just laughed and reached out to snatch my shirt as she pulled me into her waiting embrace. Her lips were soft and inviting. She pressed into me, and we both practically crashed against the mahogany desk as our kiss deepened. She wound her arms around me, one hand snaking up to the back of my neck even as I reached behind her to lose mine in her wild mane of hair.

Our lips pressed together. I licked at her lower lip, and her mouth opened in invitation, letting me inside. She tasted heavenly—like Bree, like something that was supposed to be mine. Being close to her made all of my instincts flare up and

kept me wanting more as our tongues danced in chaos with each other.

Without even thinking about it, my teeth nipped at her lower lip. Just once, and then I pulled away.

With one final kiss, I smiled at her. “Steep rates.”

Bree made even the most serious moments a bit more lighthearted, always knowing how to say exactly the right thing at exactly the right moment.

It was one of the reasons she was one of my favorite people to kiss in the whole world.

“I know,” she said, “but worth it.”

“Definitely,” I said, unable to stop myself from kissing her one last time.

Already, much of the tension had already eased out of me just from being near her. And a bright warmth filled my chest as I clung to her.

“Alright. We came here for a reason, and though it isn’t the reason either of us would like it to be, we should really get to it.” She winked at me, her hand lingering on my chest. “Come on, lover. Let’s go see what we can dig up.”

I nodded as I followed after her. “I already know the names of a few of the books that we need.”

We made our way through the aisles of books until we were able to locate the tomes in question. I didn’t want the fact that I hadn’t been raised here to interfere with anything that was about to happen. I wanted to know every last detail about the challenge and its rules, which were mired in tradition and ceremony.

Everything that could come up.

Anything that Natasha might try to use against me.

Several hours passed with me and Bree reading anything we could find, but I didn’t mind. A lot of the books were very interesting, and the challenge itself was intriguing. Of course,

it would've been more intriguing if it wasn't happening to me, but those were the pitfalls of being the prime alpha.

The challenge was a duel in all its glory—a traditional fight for honor and privilege.

It was most often done when a shifter pulled away from their main pack and chose to strike out on their own or seize a smaller pack.

It was also a way for a challenger to steal away another alpha's mates.

“Alright,” Bree said as she slid a book toward me, “I think this is the big takeaway here.”

I grabbed it before scanning the page. With a sigh, I nodded. “Once accepted, there is no backing out, or it'll bring shame on me and my house.” I scoffed. “Not that I was ever going to back down in the first place, but...” Tapping the page, I grinned. “This part that Natasha so conveniently left out. Victor's rights.” I snorted. “A little on the nose, but just as she made claims against me, if I come out the winner, I can make demands of my own—that must be upheld so long as they are keeping in line with the challenger's claims.” I looked over at Bree and smiled. “Oh, I can work with this.”

“Right?” Her tail wagged, showing that she was clearly pleased that I agreed with her.

I nodded.

There wasn't really much of anything else that was applicable to my situation beyond that. But knowing this challenge was a double-edged sword was more than a start to striking back at Mikel through his daughter.

I was done dancing to this asshole's tune.

I was going to make him regret ever thinking he could challenge me.

Shutting the book, I rose from the chair and stretched as Bree did the same. We really had been sitting for hours. “Alright. I need to talk to Monty and Remmy, figure out what they want to do.”

Bree planted both of her hands on the table and rocked forward, meeting me head-on with a smile and a coy little flick of the ears. “How about a thank-you kiss before you go?”

I laughed. “Greedy little thing, aren’t you?”

“Positively wicked,” she replied.

With a grin, I leaned forward and kissed her. It was all teeth, tongue, and passionate love.

The edge of the table bit against my lower belly, but it didn’t stop either of us. As I finally pulled away, I nipped at her lower lip.

Her tail wagged furiously at that.

“I think there might be something to this whole thing,” Bree said before settling back in her chair.

“To what thing?” I asked.

“To being the mate of the prime alpha. I mean, if nothing else, you sure know how to kiss.”

“Oh, is that why you’re with me? My kissing skills?”

“It’s certainly one of the perks.”

Grinning, I couldn’t help but ask, “And do tell, what are some of the others?”

Her smile grew even brighter, splitting across her cheeks. “Fishing for compliments, are we?”

I laughed even louder as I grabbed one of the books on ancient shifter tradition that I hadn’t finished reading. Shoving it into my bag, I met her eyes and gave her a dopey grin. “Hey, even prime alphas like to feel needed every once in a while.”

Bree gave me a fierce look as she stepped around the table and pressed herself into me. “I do need you. I know we haven’t known each other very long, but never have I wanted to rely on someone as much as I want to rely on you, Victor.” She looked up at me with her beautiful eyes, and I knew every word she’d spoken had been the truth. Bree lifted up to her toes to kiss me softly before pulling back. “Does that satisfy your question?”

“Boy, I sure hope so. I don’t know anyone who could hear that and still ask for more.”

Bree beamed at me. “Good.”

I pulled Bree up against my side for a moment, running my fingers through her hair, before we said our goodbyes. Though I wanted to stay there with her where it was safe and comfortable, I had a problem that really needed solving.

And I was nothing if not a problem solver.

With that, I turned to head out of the library without another word.

Natasha was a mess I needed to clean up. Though I supposed she wasn’t any bigger of a mess than Beaumont had been. There had been so much mystery with Beaumont, and so many political lines that had to be balanced. So many things that had to be considered. But with Natasha, it was at least going to be straightforward. A traditional fight against a woman from another house.

And at the very least, she had more stones than him or her father. She was at least willing to face me in open combat. Regardless of anything else, I had to respect that about her.

Even if her straightforwardness was meaningless in the end. No matter how she chose to play this, it could only end one way for her.

And when I won, it would give me leverage over her.

Over Mikel and House Renoire.

I had a few ideas of what I might ask for when I came away as the winner, but I wanted to run it past my generals and see if they had any addendums to it. I was trying to figure this world out; I had come into it at a bad time, without as much knowledge as most of my other classmates here at Apex Academy.

But I was smart, quick at figuring things out. And so long as I was able to get ahead of things with Natasha, I was fairly certain that the rest of this world would just fall right on into place, no questions asked, no problems to be dealt with.



Monty was in the study hall when I found him, but he had no problem packing up and helping me hunt down Remmy. We found him out on one of the practice fields in his shifted form.

When changed, lycan shifts looked a lot like they had just stepped out of a horror movie. Remmy's silver fur was heaviest around his neck and chest, forming a sort of protective ruff around the soft flesh there, and his limbs were longer than a normal human's, his arms hanging so much lower down that his knuckles nearly brushed the ground.

Each finger was topped with a claw so sharp it looked like it might have been a butcher's knife. Like most shifters, the piercings didn't change with him. Instead, his left ear was a ragged mess, ripped and torn wherever the piercings actually happened to be in his human form.

He was on all fours, practicing some sort of a routine I hadn't seen before. He would duck down low to the ground so his thick mass of silvery belly fur was dragging through the sand, then slink towards an invisible opponent, only to roll himself to the left and spring back up right behind where his opponent would be. It was impressive.

"Think we should wait until he's done?" I asked.

"Nah." Monty jerked his head toward the other side of the field. "Professor Anders is coming. She'll have him clear out for us."

The wind was blowing against her, so I hadn't scented her coming. Monty was right, though. Professor Anders was

making her way towards us, even now.

Shifter Battles was taught by Professor Naomi Anders.

She was a lynx shifter, and maybe the most badass teacher at all of Apex Academy. Despite the fact that lynx shifters weren't innately jacked, Professor Anders had the kind of muscles that made it clear she spent most of her time outside, working hard and training even harder.

Rather than the professional uniform found on most of the other professors, Professor Anders wore a tight-fitting black tank top and a pair of short, black mesh sports shorts. They had a layer of tight fabric that clung to her thighs, and then the mesh hanging loose over the top of it.

She was a tough nut, the kind of woman that you didn't want to have mad at you for any length of time. Her brows were pinched down. As she got closer, she shoved two fingers into her mouth and gave a sharp, ear-splitting whistle.

Remmy's head snapped up. When he caught sight of the woman, his ears flicked back flat—but then he shifted back into his human form. There was sweat running over the curve of his neck, dripping into his eyes. He wiped it away with the back of his hand.

“Hey, Professor,” Remmy said.

“I'm going to need you to clear out of the field,” Professor Anders replied, short and to the point as always.

Monty looked over at me and grinned. “See.”

I just shrugged. “Like I was doubting you.”

Remmy nodded to her. “No problem. I was just finishing up anyway.”

Before he could move, though, I whistled at him.

Remmy turned at once and gave me a nod. Professor Anders looked at me too, and that strange tension in her jaw wound tighter. “Victor. Excellent timing. A word, if you please.”



I glanced at Monty, and he nodded. “Don’t worry. I’ll fill Remmy in for you.”

I clapped him on the shoulder, trusting that he would handle it just fine. “Appreciate it.”

With that, I jogged over to Professor Anders.

She waited until Remmy had joined Monty, then led me about fifteen feet away. Her voice was down low so that the others couldn’t hear it. “Some free advice, Victor. The house that Natasha is from has a very specific sort of fighting style. It’s not like anything you’ve seen up to this point. I’d like to give you a crash course in the basics at the very least, lest Natasha cuts your rather amusing rule short.”

Such an offer from her had me slightly taken aback. “I would be grateful.” With a nod, I stepped back and rolled my shoulders and neck to loosen up. “Let’s get started.”

She merely chuckled at me. “So eager. If only I could get you this excited for solo drills.” She nodded to Remmy and Monty off in the distance. “You could learn a thing or two from Remmy’s dedication.” Professor Anders then shook her head. “But no, it’ll have to be this evening. It’ll take time that we don’t have right now. I need to make sure that you understand the differences in your abilities. Some of it, you’ll know—there’s only so many ways to bite and scratch one another, after all—but some of it will easily catch you off guard if you don’t know it’s coming.”

Anders was a very private person, so her choosing to spend her free time training me was a gift I hadn’t expected from her.

It just went to show how much faith she must have in me as prime alpha.

“Thank you, Professor,” I said honestly. I knew that she was a bit of a hardass, so it meant a lot to me, having her in my corner. It was good to know who I could trust and who I couldn’t; good to know which of the professors had already made their investment in my role as prime alpha and which ones still needed to be convinced.

Professor Anders shook her head. “Think nothing of it. Be here at eight. I’ll be rather cross with you if you’re late, Victor.”

“Understood.”

With that, she nodded and then turned away, walking back the way she had come. I turned as well and headed over to Remmy and Monty.

Remmy met me by asking, “What do you think you’ll request?”

“I haven’t figured out the specifics yet, but something that will hurt Mikel—that’s for damn sure.” I sighed. “Though, Natasha failed to mention the victor’s rights... I don’t understand why no one else told me. Why I had to figure it out myself.”

Monty shook his head. “I don’t know. The only thing I knew of it was that it was an old tradition—one that House Blackstone never relied on much. It’s much more of an eastern tradition than western. A lot of the old ways fell out of favor when the new world was discovered.”

“Still, you’d think that Professor Blue would’ve known about it, at the very least,” Remmy said with a scratch of his head. “Wasn’t he the last prime’s general?”

Monty’s hackles were raised just a little bit. “Yeah, but that doesn’t mean the last prime did anything like this.” He motioned to me. “Your dad kept most of the challenges against him private. If he didn’t need to make it public, he didn’t.”

Remmy didn’t look overly convinced, but I gave a minuscule shake of my head. He nodded, dropping the subject.

I knew about the victor’s rights now.

The hows and whys no one else did were unimportant now.

*Besides, if I allowed everyone to just spoon-feed me information, I’d be a truly worthless leader.*

With that settled, we went towards the alpha houses on the far wing of the Academy buildings. As we walked, we discussed the possible things that I could ask for. It had to be

something that mimicked her own demands, but in that, Natasha had unintentionally demanded far more than she could've imagined.

Not just my necklace, which was one of the only things I had of my mother, but Petra and Cass—my mates. My heart.

Natasha wanted me to hand over my heart.

I'd tear hers out for that.

And because she'd made her claim on behalf of Mikel, I could legally strike at him through his proxy, just as he was trying to strike at me.

It would take some thought, but I was going to take far more than a simple pound of flesh from them both for this.

This time, my primal heart and I were in agreement.

As we stopped outside of the alpha dorms, Remmy turned to me with a frown across his lips. "You think you can take her?"

"Is that even a question?" I said at once, letting my prime alpha confidence take over. "She doesn't stand a chance."

He nodded. "Good. Your confidence is reassuring."

Standing outside, I glanced up at the massive building and the window I knew was Natasha's temporary accommodation. Staring up at it, I finally knew exactly how I was going to strike at Mikel. How to hurt him in the worst way I possibly could.

With a hint of devious excitement in my chest, I relayed my plan to Monty and Remmy.

After, they just stared at me, eyes wide.

"Victor, are you sure about this?" Monty asked.

I nodded. "Mikel is the one who started this war. But I'm going to fucking finish it."

Remmy just grinned, the vicious spark of revenge lurking in his eyes. "Oh, I knew there was a reason I joined up with

you.” His grin widened, showing teeth. “This is going to be excellent.”

I had to agree with him.

With that, the three of us made our way into the dorms and up the stairs. Though I didn’t need it, my shifter senses pinpointed exactly where Natasha was.

The whole hallway reeked of the cloying scent of her perfume. It made my nose itch.

I tried breathing through my mouth, but the mental image of her perfume coating my tongue made me abandon that notion real quick. With a grimace, I made my way over to the door and rapped on it with my knuckles.

“Natasha. It’s Victor.”

There was a moment of silence and then the scrape of a chair against the floor. Natasha opened the door and leaned against the frame. She’d changed into another dress that was more lace than anything, hugging her body so tight it might as well have been painted on. It was elegant, but on her it toed the line of indecency.

She looked down her nose at me, flicking her shades down ever so slightly to peer at me over the rims.

I found it quite strange that she wore them indoors.

*Enchanted, maybe?*

*Are amulets and enchanted items allowed during the duel?*

I would have to find out.

Of course, there was the more mundane theory that she was simply sensitive to light... which would be a weakness I’d be sure to exploit during the fight.

“What do you want?”

I grinned at her, but it was a ferocious, primal thing filled with the depths of my rage. “Since you gave me your demands for the fight, I figured it only fair I return the favor.”

The corner of her mouth twitched, just a little bit, and her eyebrows raised by a fraction. “So someone told you.” She chuckled. “And here I was beginning to think that it might be a free battle.” She shrugged. “You’re going to lose, so I couldn’t care less about the pitiful demands of a child.” Waving her hand absently in the air, she sighed. “But ’tis tradition, no? Tell me them, quickly. And then you can leave.”

She stepped back out of the doorway, which was as much invitation as I was likely ever to get from her, but as I stepped into her room, I realized I’d made a tactical error. I should’ve just stayed at the doorway. The scent of her perfume here was so much worse than it was in the hallway, but there was nothing to do except grin and bear it.

There was no way I was going to give her an inch.

Pointedly ignoring me, Natasha went over to her desk and sat down. In front of her was a half-finished letter.

*To whom? Her father? Surely not... Mikel is close by—that, I’m sure of. No way he slunk back home with his tail between his legs after his failed assassination attempt. She likely wouldn’t need to send him a letter...*

Curiosity burned in my chest, but there was no way to get over there and check it out.

Clearly, she was going to ignore me, so I opened with the easiest of my demands. “As Mikel’s proxy... by victor’s rights, when I best you, I claim the right to challenge him to open combat. To the death.”

Her ears perked up at that in what had to be amusement. “Is that so?”

I nodded. “I’m tired of Mikel’s games. He’s a coward, and I’m going to drag him from the shadows and into the light. I’m going to make sure everyone knows exactly what kind of man your father is right before I rip his still-beating heart from his chest.”

Natasha turned to glare at me, and even through her sunglasses, her stare was ice cold. “You are so certain of your victory?”

“I’ve faced worse than you; I’m certain of that.”

She just gave me an amused chuckle before waving me away. “*Da*. Yes. I accept your condition. But you will not win, so is—how you say—moot point, yes?”

As she turned back to her letter, I let out a single chuckle. “I’m not done.”

With a sigh, Natasha faced me once more. “Then spit it out. I grow tired of this.”

“You came here to demand much of me—too much. We both know your father still has eyes at the Academy, so I’m certain you know exactly what Petra and Cass mean to me. They are my mates—my heart.” I stared Natasha down. “Whether by proxy or not, you came for my heart; it’s only fair I take Mikel’s in turn.”

My grin widened as a single second stretched to eternity.

“When I win, you, Natasha, will be Oath-Bound to me.”

A gasp shattered the tension between us. Natasha practically flew up out of her chair, her eyes wide with panic and fear. “How—how do you know that custom?”

With a casual motion, I unzipped my bag and pulled out the book I’d taken from the library. With a smirk, I tossed it at her. She was clumsy in the catch. “I brushed up on my history, bitch. You want to bring the old ways back? I can too.” I laughed. “I’m going to take the one thing that Mikel cares about from him... and don’t be flattered—we both know it’s not you. I’m going to take away his pride—his prestige as the scion of House Renoire. Just imagine the dishonor of having his own daughter swear herself to House Blackstone.” I smiled sweetly at her. “To me. You’ll belong to me, sworn to my service for the rest of your days.”

If I’d have walked up and stabbed her through the chest, I doubted I could’ve gotten more of a reaction from her.

“How dare you!?” she spat, seething.

I just shook my head. “You brought this on yourself—you and your father both.” Reaching into my shirt, I grasped the

chain around my neck and, giving it a slight tug, pulled it free so the charm on the end was visible. “And once you belong to me, you’re going to spill every dirty little secret of Mikel’s. You’re going to tell me everything you know about this necklace and Mikel’s obsession with my mother.”

Natasha snarled and took a step towards me, knocking over her chair in the process. “You’re going to die. I’m going to kill you and deliver to my father his treasures and your head to mount over his fireplace. I’m going to enjoy tearing you limb from limb.”

The snarl spilled from my throat before I could catch it. It was a harsh roar of challenge, telling her exactly what I thought of her threats.

Before she could so much as blink, I turned and left, utterly dismissing her.

And judging by the way Natasha slammed the door behind me, I’d succeeded in seriously pissing her off.

*Good.*



Classes had to continue to keep up appearances, but the whole Academy was on edge, and no one seemed to know what they were supposed to be doing. I could feel it in the air; it was a very palpable, alive thing. But the illusion had to be maintained. The students had to go back to class. We couldn't let the rest of the world think that we were rattled.

Apex Academy was the heart of our house. It was one of the most well-known shifter places of learning in the world; the prestige associated with this school was like nothing else.

And the fact that Natasha was here only made it even more vital that nobody caught on to how nervous everyone was. Two teachers lost, and now an age-old traditional challenge about to be undertaken?

It was a lot.

Professor Anders had done as promised, taking every chance to show me what she knew about the way that people from Mikel's house fought. But it didn't mean that her classes were going to stop.

I had a private lesson with her that afternoon and had come out early to watch. Thankfully, the training grounds were massive and numerous, just in case they got messed up in our fights. There was a white chalk line on the ground, forming a large circle. This kept the fighters from spreading too far out of their designated zone and made sure that no one else got pulled into it.



The other students were made to stand outside of it, in a crowd of sorts. It was both to teach us how to fight with a lot going on and to give everyone a chance at seeing what a fight looked like up close.

Today, two of the alphas I was eyeing as future generals were going head-to-head with each other.

There was Davis, who had come a long way since our last fight. His lynx form was lithe but muscular, with a thick tuft of fur just underneath his chin. He had been paired up against Elijah King.

Now, Elijah was the alpha for the avian shifters. He was a little on the shorter side for his class and a little broader than most avians happened to be. His feathers were a brilliant hue of blue, which matched his hair, and when he shifted, he looked as fierce as any avian.

He had blue feathering on the sides of his face and over his ears, and it struck up into his hair as well. The avians were an odd shift, because they were noticeably inhuman even when they *weren't* turned into their animal form. All types could shift, but the avians were bestial even in their human form.

Their teeth were pointed and turned slightly inwards, almost mirroring a beak, and their feathery forms were always visible. Some of them had pin feathers on their knuckles, and others had plumage on their chests, even when they were far away from being anything other than fully human.

Elijah had a sharp glint to his eyes as a human, and it transferred with him when he turned into his full-on shift as well.

I couldn't help but fondly recall what Professor Balboa had said about avian shifters during one of my first classes with him; *Avians have wide wings and are capable of both short flight and gliding. The hooked spurs on their wings can be deadly, and their beaks are for gouging. They can be very dangerous, but their more delicate bodies and hollow bones make them solely offensive shifters. Cautious and thoughtful, they tend to have one hundred percent control of their faculties when they shift.*

That was apparent in the way that Elijah held himself once he shifted. His blue plumage expanded out, covering his neck and the rest of his body. Wings jutted from his shoulder blades, and there were longer feathers on the curves of his arms. A sharp beak glinted in front of his face, which had rearranged itself into something incredibly vicious.

Before Professor Anders signaled the fight to start, she said, “I think we have all noticed our visitor today.”

The visitor in question was Natasha, who had stopped several yards away on the crest of a hill to watch us. She was once again dressed to the nines, her scarf pulled around her head and sunglasses slid back into place. The wind was strong, thankfully, so her perfume was impossible to notice.

Professor Anders lowered her voice slightly so it wouldn't carry as far, then told the two alphas about to fight, “I want you on your best behavior. If I have to break this up because you've turned our lesson into a spat, you *will* regret it. We're representing House Blackstone today. Fight like it.”

Both shifters nodded in response. The tension in the air was so thick it ought to have been cut with a butter knife. It clung to us, even to me. I glanced up at Natasha; was she truly curious what our classes were like? Was she trying to gather information to pass back on to her father?

They were both viable options, but something told me that they were also both wrong.

This felt more like a power play than anything else.

Natasha wanted us to know that she was here. That she was watching. And more importantly, that she was unbothered by being in another house's territory.

After I'd laid down my challenge, I was sure Natasha was trying to find any measure she could to stand tall and save face, but it couldn't hide that I'd rattled her façade.

Thankfully, both Elijah and Davis knew what they were doing. The moment that Professor Anders signaled it was time for them to go, they lunged at each other. There was no circling about, no trying to feel each other out.

It was a raw display of power.

Davis lunged at Elijah with snapping jaws, but the avian shifter flapped twice and jumped up into the air, easily clearing Davis's form. He kicked out with one leg, catching Davis in the head.

Davis jerked sideways, shaking his head. Elijah dropped onto him from above. The front of an avian's hands were topped with sharp claws. He slammed them down, gripping and digging at the back of Davis's neck—but the lynx dropped to the ground and rolled.

Elijah squawked as he was crushed beneath Davis's much larger form. The grip was lost, and Davis was able to jump back onto his feet and sink his fangs into one of Elijah's hind legs. He snarled and pulled, trying to drag Elijah towards the edge of the rink.

I could see that he was getting ready to throw the avian out towards the crowd—which would have been an early end to the match—but Elijah suddenly twisted into a crunch and sank his beak into the flesh of Davis's side.

It was so sharp that it split his skin. Blood stained the silvery fur. With a yowl of pain, Davis let go and scrambled—but not backwards.

It was a training match, and backing up to catch your breath would have been understandable and expected. But the fact that Natasha was there, watching, observing, was enough to make Davis and Elijah both treat it like a far more real match.

They threw themselves forward, twisting and hissing, biting and pecking. Elijah jumped into the air, arms and wings flapping as he kicked out, catching Davis in the face several times. Davis snapped on the fourth kick, rearing up onto his hind legs and throwing himself forward.

His paws slammed into Elijah's chest and knocked him straight out of the sky. The avian hit the ground, and he didn't have any time to get up before Davis was on him, biting and pulling out mouthfuls of colorful feathers. Blue and red both

stained the ground. Elijah started to flap his greater back wings, slamming Davis in the side and the face with them.

The wind that was kicked up caused a flurry of dust to cascade out over the crowd of students. I flung an arm up over my face, squinting my eyes through the grit. It made them sting and burn as tears spilled down my cheeks, but I still kept an eye on the action.

Davis was knocked asunder, and Elijah scrambled to his feet, putting distance between them. Then he hunkered down, bent at the knees, feathers fluffed up to make himself look bigger. Great big patches had been pulled from him, revealing the purple-gray skin beneath. It was hard to tell if that was the natural tone under his shifted feathers or if his flesh had already bruised from the rough treatment.

Either way, their time was up.

Practice matches could end several ways: One of the fighters was knocked out of the ring, their time ran out, or they went at it so hard that Professor Anders had to intervene.

They were always announced in the same manner too. When shifters fought, they got incredibly focused. It was hard to keep track of the world around them. A simple whistle wouldn't have done anything. It would have been either completely ignored or brushed off as being from the crowd.

Instead, Professor Anders slipped into her own shift. It was that of a great lynx, covered in scars. They crisscrossed over her shoulders and her flank, making the skin beneath seem raised and glossy. There was a particularly puckered-looking line on the left side of her neck, where something with claws had given her a good blow.

Shifters had an exceptional ability to heal themselves. That meant that for a scar to stick, it had to have been a dangerous and deadly blow, and it had to have been something that wasn't treated right away—or treated poorly.

She shouldered her way between the two fighters with a snarl, and they both backed off. All three turned into their human forms, the two opposing alphas soaked with sweat. I

was more than a little impressed with how they acted; they were both good fighters, and they were levelheaded and well respected.

I needed to finish gathering my generals.

Though I would've preferred to take my time more with feeling them out, my instincts for picking the right people hadn't led me astray so far. Remmy had been a very quick acquisition, but he had proven himself time and time again during the Beaumont affair.

I trusted both him and Monty with my life.

And with Natasha here, and her father likely waiting in the wings to cull me, I needed all the help I could get to deal with the threats looming over me and my house.

My gaze shifted over to where Natasha was still standing, watching the display. She seemed more amused by the fight than anything else.

It would be beneficial if I could gain my generals before my fight with her. For each general and mate that I took, my own power was not only doubled but easier to control. Shifts could be obtained at any point. Because a prime alpha was the only one capable of shifting into more than one phenotype, it was hard to figure out what triggered the form changes.

But when you *did* get them, they were a little on the wild side. The instincts of your animal shift could be hard to ignore; their temper and their traits could influence you in ways that were better off avoided.

The only way to settle a shift was to gain a mate and a general in the respective phenotype. I had a lynx form unlocked already—it was the second shift that I had gained—but because of the fight with Jakarta, the original lynx alpha, I had been unable to get a general for the shift.

And avians... I hadn't been around them too much.

I would need to change both of those things, and I would need to do it... fast.

The class broke up shortly after that. It was by pure chance that I caught sight of Lillin Sendaris.

She was a saurian omega. Her hair was an emerald green, and her eyes were a bright ruby red; they were common colors among her phenotype. She was short, with a thick body. The kind of crazy curves that drew the eye, paired with thick thighs and a soft, sweet belly.

I loved looking at her. She had the same emerald scales near her ears, and I knew that she had a long tongue between those gloss-covered lips. The problem was, her name had been on one of the lists of people that Beaumont had had *something* going on with.

And right then, she was walking straight towards Natasha.

The two greeted each other, though they were far enough away that I couldn't hear what they were saying. Then they turned and left.

Together.

In plain view of everyone.

Something told me that *wasn't* a good sign for where Lillin stood in regard to her house loyalty.



I was determined to get as much practice in as I possibly could. That meant that I wasn't just going to rely on what Professor Anders was teaching me.

The moment that classes were out for the day, I gathered up my two generals and brought them to the training fields. We each took a few minutes to do some individual warmups, making sure to stretch and adopt the right headspace for a friendly match.

"She's a lycan, same as her father," I was saying. "That gives me at least a little step up. I've done my fair share of fighting lycans."

Remmy snorted. "You've got a step up because you already have me as your general."

"And you know how that shift moves, since you can access it yourself," Monty said, nodding. "I figure you'll be in pretty good shape for this."

"I don't know about that, but it's better off than if we were dealing with a different shift entirely," I replied.

We were going to spend the whole evening sparring. That was the plan, but we weren't even able to get into our shifted forms before I caught the scent of someone coming our way. I tilted my head up and sniffed at the air, eyes narrowing slightly.

"Is that Fero?" I asked.

Fero Noriega was the saurian alpha. I could smell him before I saw him.

“I think so,” Monty said. “What’s he doing way the hell out here?”

“Looking for you,” Fero called as he crested the hill. He was a short but powerful-looking shifter, with red hair and red scales on his face. He had bright crimson eyes, the same color as his scales, and a long reptilian tail that hung out from the top of his pants.

To accommodate his tail, he wore specially tailored pants, which hung a little bit lower on his hips, almost like a pair of harem-styled slacks.

“What business do you have with the prime?” Monty asked with a frown.

“I needed to talk with you about one of the saurians,” said Fero. He paused, then blinked slowly before glancing at Monty and Remmy.

“Don’t worry,” I said, waving him off. “We can talk freely in front of them. I trust my generals with my life. It would be foolish not to trust them with my secrets as well.”

Fero blinked again. His eyelids closed from the side, just like a lizard’s. I was torn on saurians.

Professor Balboa was a saurian—but so was the shifter that had attacked me in the woods. My experience so far had been overwhelmingly neutral. It left me a bit uneasy.

“What did you want to talk about?” I asked.

Fero nodded. “Right. Right. I wanted to talk to you about one of the shifters in my pack.”

As an alpha, he was in charge of all the saurians in the school. They would eventually be part of other packs after they graduated, but during their time at Apex Academy, the saurian shifters were all part of Fero’s pack.

That meant he was supposed to keep them in line, and they were supposed to follow his lead. It was why I’d had so much trouble with the lynx shifters during my initial arrival here; Jak



had influenced them to the point where they had very little interest in working with me, even though I was the prime alpha.

“Let me guess... Lillin, right?”

He froze and then nodded. “How did you know?”

I shrugged, not willing to give away my secrets to him quite as easily as my generals. “I’m the prime alpha,” I said, as if that was in any way an answer and not an obvious deflection.

But it seemed Fero bought into the bullshit I was shoveling, as he just nodded. “Yeah. Her.”

“What about Lillin has you so concerned?” I asked, though I already knew the answer to that as well.

Fero shook his head. He had shaggy hair, cut down to the chin. A strange pin was hooked into the lapel of his jacket. I didn’t recognize the logo, but it was a high-quality enamel. “She’s never been a problem before. Quiet. Well behaved. Good grades.”

I nodded. “Go on.”

“The woman here, Natasha.” He said her name strangely, with too much emphasis on the *sh* in the word. “She and Lillin... they’re spending a lot of time together.”

“I’m aware.”

He looked up and nodded. “Of course you would be.” Fero had a very strange way of speaking, sometimes using too many words in his sentences and other times not using enough of them. I didn’t think that it was a regional accent; I had never heard anyone else talk like that. “But it is more than that, I believe. They aren’t just talking. Often, I turn around, and they are together. Lillin smells of Natasha all the time. Too much to be just talking. Conspiring, I think. Bold as brass, to flaunt such defiance in front of anyone and everyone. As if they don’t care who’s watching. As if they’re untouchable.” He sighed and nodded to me. “I was going to speak to her, but then I thought, no, you’re the prime alpha.”

It was a sign of respect—both that he was willing to defer to me on this, and that he was willing to dip his head in my direction. That was good. The more respect the alphas had for me, the easier it would be to convince them that they should swear their general oath to me.

I knew that, in the past, some prime alphas had arranged for a culling to make sure that the beta they were most fond of became the next alpha, so they could get *them* sworn in as general. But I had already decided that wasn't the sort of prime that I wanted to be.

My human half and shifter half had to meet in the middle, or I was never going to be able to fully lead the house the way that I *knew* I could. And that meant I had to accept killing—something that had already become a far easier pill to swallow—but I also had to be able to resist the urge to senselessly cull others too.

It would be a lot easier if I could just convince the current alphas to side with me. Respect from Fero was a good starting point.

“I'll speak to her about it,” I told him.

A look of relief crossed Fero's face. He said again, “She is a good person. I don't know why she is with the other woman so often. *Natasha*. It seems... so very unlike *Lillin*.”

*Yeah, I bet. Knowing Beaumont and Mikel's MO, they'll have something on Lillin, or her family, and they're blackmailing her...*

Which was good, because after catching sight of her, I had to admit that she was very appealing. Something about her just did it for my primal side. And if she was really just a pawn for *Natasha* and *Mikel*, and I could free her... Well, that prospect wasn't exactly unappealing.

*Maybe I just have a thing for damsels in distress? Though Cass would have my balls nailed to a wall if I ever called her that to her face.*

“Are the two of you close?” I asked, curious. Alphas could take mates when they wanted, and the truth was, I wanted to

fish about and see if Lillin had already been taken.

If not... well, that was certainly information that might come in handy sooner or later.

Fero lifted up one hand and wiggled it in a so-so gesture. “We are friends, sometimes. Not others.”

“Helpful,” grumbled Remmy.

Fero blinked at Remmy and then, as though he didn’t understand the sarcasm at all, said, “I hoped that it would be.”

“It was,” I said, shooting Remmy a look that very clearly said *shut up*.

Remmy looked away, irritated but at least willing to listen.

“Good,” said Fero, echoing the sentiment a second time. “I don’t know what she is doing. Maybe you will.”

“I’ve got a good idea,” I said, clapping him on the shoulder. “But as soon as I know anything concrete, I’ll let you know.”

A few words of thanks were exchanged, and then Fero went on his way, heading around the training fields and back towards the building in the distance.

Monty said, “Is it just me, or is he... a little odd?”

Remmy shook his head. “Fero’s always been like that. We’ve met outside of the Academy a few times.”

“Can we trust him?” I asked.

Remmy said, “I’ve got no reason to think that we shouldn’t. His family—they’re loyal to the house. I’ve met them before.” He paused. “They’re just as odd as he is. I’m not surprised that’s the way he turned out.”

“So, this bit with Lillin,” Monty said. “We can trust that he isn’t involved?”

Remmy nodded. Then his gaze shifted to me. “What are you going to do about it?”

“Exactly what I said.” I stretched my arms up above my head, rolling my shoulders and popping my wrists at the same

time. “I’m going to go and talk to her.”

“And our spar?” Monty asked.

I pursed my lips together. “It can wait. If we can steal another piece off the board for Mikel, I think that trumps me kicking both your asses in training, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Against both of us?” Monty laughed. “I dunno about all that.”

“At the very least, we’d give you a run for your money.” Remmy nodded. “But yeah, I think dealing with Lillin now is the wisest course of action.”

“Yeah, what he said,” Monty replied with a grin. “Strategy isn’t really my thing, but even I can see what we need to do here.”

As we started walking, Remmy turned to him and flashed a grin. “Don’t worry, if we need any doors kicked in or heavy couches moved, we know just who to call!”

Monty laughed and waved to him. “Thank you! At least someone appreciates my talents.”

The three of us looked at each other before bursting out laughing.

It faded just as quickly, though, and we got back on topic. “Either of you know where Lillin’s room is?”

Remmy shook his head. “I don’t keep track of anyone that’s not one of your girls or in my pack.”

“You keep track of my girls?” I asked, teasing. “That’s cute of you, Remmy.”

He just rolled his eyes at me.

“What about you, Monty?” I asked.

He was one of the friendliest guys in the Academy. Monty knew everyone, and everyone knew him. If you had a problem, it was Monty that stepped in to help.

Didn’t matter the phenotype, didn’t matter the status. Even before my recent announcement that had brought deltas back

onto the same level as omegas, Monty had been very much in their corner.

So really, I wasn't surprised when he turned to me and flashed a grin. "I've got an idea or two."

I grinned back at him. At least *this* seemed to be going the way that I had hoped.



According to Monty, there were two places where Lillin could usually be found: the reading nook on the third floor, west wing, or trying to sneak something out of the kitchens. Since breakfast hadn't been that long ago, I decided that checking out the reading nook would be my best bet and headed off in that direction, instructing both Remmy and Monty to keep an eye out for Lillin while they went about their own days.

The reading nook itself was a familiar spot. I had seen Monty here with his girlfriend, Coriander, back when they hadn't been meant to be with each other. It wasn't a surprise that Monty knew everyone who came and went from that place.

Without that knowledge, there would have been no way for him to keep track of things.

Someone was sitting in one of the big plush armchairs at the end of the hallway. There were two of them, one framing either side of the narrow floor-to-ceiling window. There was a bookshelf on either side of the window. Light cut in through it.

Unfortunately, it wasn't Lillin or anyone else that could have been of use to me. It was just an avian beta, sitting and writing in what looked to be their journal. I stepped past them, over to the window between the two chairs, and looked out.

"Have you seen anyone else up here today?" I asked softly.

The beta looked confused. I wanted to say his name was Jasper. He shook his head. "No. Apologies, Prime, but I only just got here myself."

I sighed but nodded to him. “Thanks anyway, Jasper.”

“You know my name?”

“Course I do,” I said as I inhaled softly.

The nook didn’t particularly smell like Lillin, but it had a lot of overlapping student scents clinging to it.

“Anyway, sorry to bother you,” I said as I headed back out of the nook, slightly frustrated. That meant I was going to have to check in the kitchens instead.

The dining hall and the kitchens were two separate entities, connected by a small, short hallway. Neither of them could be accessed from the main building, which meant that I would need to hike all the way back down to the ground floor, across the grounds themselves, and then off to the dining hall.

I had only made it to the second floor when Cass caught me—literally, snagging me by the wrist as I went past. “There you are!”

Cassandra White was a bear kin, only an inch shorter than I was. She wore her red-brown hair in a bun and was so muscular that the sleeves of her jacket looked like they were borderline too tight. She was an omega with broad hips and broad shoulders. She loved plants, and when she wasn’t wearing the Academy uniform, she often wore flower-print everything. During the school year when she was in the uniform, she wore socks that had bright yellow flowers hand-embroidered onto them. Her skirt highlighted her excellent ass, which I couldn’t help but very briefly ogle.

She had adorable bear ears and a puffy bear tail, along with short fur on the outside of her thighs and lower back. The fur on her thighs was visible between her short skirt and her tall, flower-clad socks. She owned her large body with confidence, and I knew for a fact that she kept an ivory pocketknife on her at all times.

We’d only been together a few days, but I would be the first to admit that I had fallen for Cass, and I had fallen for her *hard*.

We might not have had the smoothest get-together, but that didn't change the fact that we were destined to be mates. Or the fact that she looked *highly* irritated just now.

I held the hand that she wasn't clutching out to the side. "Here I am?"

"I've been looking for you," said Cass. She glanced around as though making sure that no one else was within earshot.

I told her, "If this is about Lillin, I already know that something needs to be done."

Her expression soured. "Lillin?"

"Okay, this isn't about Lillin." Just to make sure we were on the same page, I added, "Sorry, I was trying to find her for Fero. She's been spending a lot of time hanging around Natasha."

No secrets. That was a personal policy that I had developed pretty much around the time Mikel tried to have me killed. There were too many loose ends to keep track of. When it came to my girls and my generals, we had to be honest with each other.

"Honestly," said Cass, "I don't really give a fuck about any of that at the moment."

"Okay. What, uh... What's going on, then?" God, I wasn't sure how many more problems could be piled on my shoulders this week. Every time I turned around, there was something else that had to be done, picked up, taken care of, tracked down, fought. It was exhausting.

Cass narrowed her eyes at me. "What do you *think* is going on?"

"Honestly? No clue."

She let go of my wrist and I rubbed it. Cass was crazy strong, like all bear kin, and had that natural temper we all struggled to deal with. I flexed my fingers a few times to help knock the ache out of them.

Her gaze flicked down to my wrist, then back up to my face. "You've been avoiding me."



“No. I most certainly have not been avoiding you.”

“You must be,” Cass replied at once. “Otherwise, you’d have properly claimed me by now.”

Oh. *Oh*. Okay, that made a lot more sense than anything else that could have been going on. My expression softened, and I reached out, making to touch the side of Cass’s face. She jerked out of my reach before my fingers could get that far.

“It’s definitely not that, and you know it,” I said with a sigh. “Natasha threw everything out of sync when she showed up. I haven’t been avoiding you. I’m doing everything I can to keep you from going anywhere. This challenge... It’s important.”

Cass lifted her chin up, her gaze surprisingly hard. “Claiming me is an even bigger deal, Victor.” A pause, a slight falling of confidence. “If you’re actually interested in that.”

“You know that I am,” I told her. “And you’re right. This should have already happened.”

“Then why hasn’t it?” Cass asked.

Before she could slip away from me, I leaned forward and kissed her. It was a chaste, lingering thing—a press of lips where I tried to push as much feeling as I could into it. I loved her, and I wasn’t going to let her go if it was the last thing I did.

When we parted, I sighed. “You’re right. I’ve been so caught up in hurricane Natasha that I’ve neglected my mates—especially you. I should’ve made time for you, but I was so invested in making sure that Natasha couldn’t take you away from me that I thought that alone would prove how much I need you in my life.”

Cass paused, her eyes downcast. “It does, Victor. It does... but...”

My hands dropped down to her hips. I walked her backwards until her shoulders bumped up against the wall. Then I snagged her chin and lifted it so she met my eyes. “But nothing. I should’ve made sure you knew that I wanted—*want*—to claim you. That you’re mine.”

Her back hit the wall. I kissed her again, and this time there was nothing chaste about it. It was tongue and tooth and pure passion, the scent of Cass rising and temporarily stripping my interest in finding Lillin from my mind. All I could think about, in that moment, was Cass.

Nothing else mattered in that moment but making sure Cass knew I wanted her. That I *did* want to claim her. That nothing had changed between us just because a few more days had passed.

When we parted, we were both breathless. A heavy blush had settled on her cheeks, and her eyes were bright with a totally different emotion. I could smell the arousal coming off her in waves. It made my own mouth water, my cock twitching with interest in my slacks.

Her hands shoved against my shoulders, pushing me back. I went easy, hands up—but before I could even start to think that I might have done something wrong, Cass was grabbing me by both wrists.

I quickly found myself dragged off into another classroom, an empty one, where Cass instructed, “If that’s the case, then you can claim me here and now.”

And fuck it all, how was I possibly supposed to refuse a request like that?



“Right here?” I asked her, brows raising up towards my hairline.

Cass was already undoing the button of her jacket and sliding it off. The dark fabric was tossed to the side, over the back of one of the chairs. Then she started in on her shirt. “Yes, right here. Got a problem with that?”

I grinned. “Sure don’t.”

Cass laughed. “Good. Besides, we don’t know when we’re going to have the time for this again.” She smirked. “You’re a very busy man these days, after all.”

I chuckled and nodded. “So it seems.”

With the fight coming up, my life was about to get even crazier. Especially if I got my rewards—Mikel would not take my affront to him lying down—official challenge or not.

So Cass was right.

What better time than now?

I didn’t want to go and face down Natasha or Mikel without claiming her first. I was a confident guy, but I liked to think that I wasn’t cocky. And if there was even a sliver of a chance that Mikel was going to win, I wanted to be with Cass before that happened.

So I kissed her.

I kissed her deep and hard. I ran my hands over her sides and backed her up against a wall once more. The top few

buttons of her shirt were undone, showing off a flash of her pink lace bra and the soft skin of her breasts.

But just like Cass was too impatient to wait for anything fancier than an empty room, I was too impatient to wait for even more of her skin to come into view. I wanted her here; I wanted her now. The sweet scent of her arousal had gone straight to my head.

See, that was the real kicker about being a shifter.

Not only did it give you this burning-hot sort of anger, but it filled you with this unending, curling storm of lust. I wanted her more than I had ever wanted anything. In that moment, the entire universe was condensed down to this classroom and to the two of us here, together. To the way that she looked. The pink of her cheeks, the brightness of her eyes.

I dropped my hands to her hips, my fingers bunching up in the fabric of her skirt. As I hiked it higher up her waist, Cass fumbled with my belt and the buttons on my slacks. The zipper came down, and her pink panties followed suit.

Cass kicked out with one leg, letting them hit the tile floor. I pressed my hands to her thighs, feeling the softness of her skin beneath my fingers. They were thick and plush, the kind of thing that I just wanted to sink my teeth into.

“Come on,” said Cass. “Victor, before someone comes in.”

“No one will disturb us,” I promised, and it was true—completely not just an excuse for me to take my time savoring her body.

Shifters could smell when someone else was fucking, and we all acted under the same code: We don’t go and interrupt them, or they’re going to make a point of coming and interrupting us.

That was especially true when it came to alphas, and even more so when it came to me—the prime alpha, the leader of the house, the head of the pack.

But it was a fun thought anyway, wasn’t it? The *idea* that someone might come by, that we might have to worry. See, I

wanted that. That burst of heat. The tension of potentially getting caught. It certainly ramped things up.

As I continued, my fingers found her pussy easily, rubbing over the length of her slit. Slickness formed on the tips of my fingers. I found the nub of her clit easily, and she gasped, her eyes fluttering shut.

Those strong hands of hers curled around my shoulders again, holding me steady. It was almost tight enough to hurt. I pressed my fingers up into her wet entrance, teasing her slowly until she let out a soft moan and then an even lower growl.

“That’s not claiming me.”

“Are you really complaining?” I asked with a grin before shoving my face into the crook of her neck. I took a moment to lick and suck at her pale neck until little bright red bursts bloomed beneath my mouth. Each of those hickies got another lick to them.

“I’m not complaining, and you damn well know it.” Cass shoved my pants the rest of the way down, my boxers following suit. “But we’ll have all the time in the world for this after I’m yours in body and soul. After you claim me.”

Though I didn’t want to be rushed, it was clear to me how much this meant to Cass and how much not being claimed was bothering her.

I was the one who had made her feel this way, so my pleasure could wait until after I’d eased Cass’s mind.

I grabbed onto her hips and lifted her up, easily pressing her against the wall with a flex of my muscles. I kissed her again, swallowing the sound of her gasp in the process.

The length of my cock pressed against the cradle of her hips. Her skirt fell over top of us, hiding my own shaft from view. I held her steady. Cass reached down between us, fumbling, to take hold of my cock and guide it so that the head pressed against her entrance.

Warm, wet, and delectable.

I groaned, pressing the flats of my teeth to the curve of her neck. With a single roll of my hips, I had spread her open. Cass made a low growl again, then a shout, and then her fingers dug so hard into the back of my shoulders that I could feel her nails even through the fabric of my shirt and the thickness of my jacket.

I grunted, rolling my hips again, more of my length pressing into her. And more, and more, until I had bottomed out and we were both standing there, panting and relishing the sensation of the union. Hot, wet heat wrapped around me.

It drove everything else from my mind, like an animal. Fucking was the only thing that I could think about... and it was exactly what I did. I rolled my hips, pulling out almost completely and then driving back up into her. Each buck had her sliding slightly over the wall, knocking a whine and a grunt and a growl from her lips.

I wasn't being any quieter. There was something about *hearing* Cass that made me want to be just as loud. And considering the way that the Academy functioned—well, shit, I didn't have to try and not be loud. I could growl against her neck as I fucked her, and grunt, and make these low, bass sounds from deep in my chest.

And then Cass's body jerked like she was coming apart at the seams, and she came around my cock.

I froze, my eyes going wide as I looked at her.

Cass let out a heavy sigh.

“Oh,” I said, thrown off by that. I hadn't been expecting her to come this soon; I hadn't had a chance to claim her, hadn't had a chance to spill myself. But I also wasn't a dick. I shifted and made to pull backwards, and she dropped a hand down and grabbed my ass.

“Don't,” she panted. “Don't stop.”

“You sure? I don't want—”

Her body flexed around me, cunt going tight. I groaned and rolled my hips almost against my own will.

Cass made a pleased sound. “Better. Come on, I want to feel you come in me.”

“Fuck,” I grunted, starting to roll my hips in earnest again. It was an even wetter slide this time around, a roll and a press, the sounds lewd but nearly drowned out by the way that she was panting. By the way that I was growling.

I couldn't help it.

The sounds billowed up in the back of my throat and came out all on their own. My teeth pressed to the curve of her neck. I could feel my own orgasm building up inside of me, and judging from the way that Cass was clawing at the back of my shirt, there was a second one curling up inside of her.

As the pleasure built to a crescendo, I bit down on the side of her neck. My teeth were sharper than they should be, sinking in with a claiming bite. The euphoria that the sensation caused was enough to send both of us over the edge.

Our orgasms were a joined thing: Bodies pressed together, sweat on our foreheads and dripping down the side of my cheek. And I could feel it. The way that the bear kin inside of me finally settled. The way that it knew that it was finally no longer alone.

I held myself there for a long moment, just relishing the sensation. My teeth pulled away from her neck first, and then I slipped from her pussy and lowered her to the ground. I didn't let go of Cass, though.

Probably for the best. Her legs were trembling, and her whole body seemed to have gone unsteady. I pressed my lips to the side of her neck, the flat of my tongue lapping at the bite wound. Copper was on my tongue, but only for a moment. Then the wound healed up, as it often happened with shifters.

It took no time at all for even the bruising to go away, but that didn't mean that the bite itself was gone. It didn't mean that she hadn't been well and fully claimed.

After we finished, I plastered her in kisses, turning a very lewd and tawdry moment into something softer. Something sweeter.

She was the one that broke the silence first.

“I just didn’t know what else to do.”

“We don’t need to keep talking about it,” I promised, breathing in her scent. The sharp tang of salty sweat on her skin, the sweetness of our cum. I licked a wet line over the side of her throat and then pressed a kiss to the corner of her mouth. “It happened. We dealt with it. And you’re mine now.”

“I am,” said Cass, sounding pleased with herself. “I’m *yours*.” And then, a little smug, “And you’re mine too. You get that, right? This whole thing goes both ways.”

She recovered from her second orgasm quickly enough, though we were both still standing there, pressed against the wall. Her eyes were half-closed, and there was a curl of a smile there, faint but gorgeous. Her hair clung to the curve of her neck, held there with sweat.

I couldn’t help but smile too. A part of my soul had been settled in response to that crashing orgasm, to the feeling of spilling inside of her. Those prime alpha instincts had been sated for the moment, as had my own emotional cravings. I genuinely loved her, and she loved me too. We were mates, in the same way that I had become mates with Petra and Bree.

Something in my chest finally felt like it was whole again. All three parts of my bear kin form had been located: my own shift, my general, and my bear kin mate. It was no longer wild and ravenous but content and fully mine. Mine to hold and have, just like Cass was.

Our mouths met again, though the kiss was languid and slow, my tongue curling against her sharp teeth. I wanted this moment to last forever. It made me furious that it couldn’t. That I was actually on a mission today, and Lillin still needed to be located.

The other woman was a big deal.

She was involved in something. And no matter how badly I wanted to stay here with Cass and just exist beside her, I had to treat my duties seriously. I pulled away from her slowly, letting my hands linger on the skin. Her skirt fell down far



enough to cover the spill between her legs, but it was impossible not to smell the cum on her.

Even if Cass went to the showers right now and scrubbed down, everyone that she passed would know that I had just claimed her. The thought made something curl contentedly inside of me; this piece of prime alpha pride. I wanted the world to know that she belonged to me.

I would have claimed her in public, if I could. Would have claimed her so that everyone could watch as Cass gave her beautiful self up to me willingly, the same way that she'd refused to give herself to Mikel.

Cass ran a hand over my chest. "You know, I think that might have been worth the wait."

"Well, I won't be putting it off again, I'll tell you that much," I said with a small huff of laughter. "I don't think that I'm ever going to get enough of you."

Cass leaned back against the wall, spread her legs, and arched her belly towards me. "I'm still here for the taking, Victor. I'm not going anywhere. You'll make sure of that."

She was right.

If it was the last thing I ever did in this life, I was going to make sure nothing bad would happen to any of my mates.



Unfortunately, I did eventually have to leave the room. Cass stayed behind to finish recovering from her double-orgasm bliss, and I went on to try and finish finding Lillin. I knew that I looked and smelled like a guy that had just finished getting laid.

But I didn't really give a damn.

When I first got to the Academy, that had been enough to make me feel embarrassed. But now, it was just... part of it. I was more confident in myself.

I knew that there was something about me that had a power, a pull, a sway, a swagger, and as I walked through the house reeking of sweat, I sensed that there was no one who didn't know that I had just claimed Cass.

And I *loved* it.

Granted, that euphoria had vanished some by the time I made it out onto the grounds of the Academy. They were big and vast, and it took a bit for me to actually make it all the way over to the dining hall. The upside?

That meant I had plenty of time to get myself back into the right frame of mind to get some work done.

The dining hall was a large room with two long tables on either side—like an old-fashioned cafeteria—and then a slew of smaller tables scattered around the outskirts of the room. The smaller tables were square, and each had only two accompanying chairs. Mated couples sat at these tables... and

couples that were flirting so hard they were clearly *trying* to make it a little bit further.

Like the rest of the Academy, the dining hall appeared to be opulent and rich. The walls were a dark wood, and the floors were marble. There was an eatery at the far end of it. A portly man was on the back side of the counter, looking rather bored. His thinning, wiry hair was pushed out of his face, and he had a hand propped up against his chin. His other hand was idly trying to fill in the spaces on a word puzzle.

Unlike most places at university, the dining hall was never closed. Shifters had massive appetites, and while we could just go out and hunt our own food, it was easier in a way to just keep the dining hall open twenty-four-seven.

There were set times when the big meals were served, and the rest of the time, you could just go into the kitchens and make yourself something to eat.

I nodded at the man who ran the front counter, then turned and made my way through the big double doors at the far back of the dining hall. It led me into a small hallway, and then I passed through two more double doors.

This was the first time that I had been into the kitchen.

I wasn't much of a cook, and I actually really liked hunting. So that meant I either got my meals from the dining hall, or I got them out in the forest—something fresh-caught and still warm as I ripped into the soft meat of its neck.

It was a huge room, industrial and state of the art. Unlike the rest of the Academy, which seemed to have an almost old-school vibe to it, the kitchens had clearly recently been remodeled. Everything was silver and chrome and white. There were doors at the back, which I figured probably led into a freezer or a refrigeration chamber. Could have been either. Could have been both.

And right there, just like I had been hoping, was Lillin.

I cleared my throat. She looked up at me, freezing. The onions that she was cutting must have covered my scent, because her eyes were wide as saucers. "Victor!"

The name came out as a squeak. I could practically see the guilt coming off her in waves. She was looking at me as though I had come in there to slaughter her.

“We need to talk.”

The words had barely gotten out of my mouth when she started *spilling* sentences. It was like someone had opened up a dam, her admissions just flooding out of her. “I’m so, so sorry, Victor.”

The knife hit the counter. She grabbed a cloth and wiped her hands off on it, then stepped past me and made for the sink instead. She lathered up her palms to get rid of the onion scent.

“It’s not... It’s not me; it was my parents,” said Lillin.

“Lillin,” I started.

She just kept talking, borderline babbling. “They’ve been working for Mikel since before I was born.” She cut the water off. “And they want me to do it too, but I don’t want to, Victor. I’m about as loyal to you as they come.”

“Lillin.” I reached out, pressing a hand to her shoulder. The moment that we touched, I could feel the spark slide up my arm and into my elbows, jolting my shoulder. “Take a breath. What were your parents doing with Mikel? Start there.”

“They work on his transport team,” said Lillin, the response just about as smooth and easy as they come. “If something needs to go from here to there, they help get it done. And they’ve been doing that since before I was born, for years and years now. I don’t know why. They think that he’s some kind of great messiah. But I’m *not* like that, Victor. I don’t want anything to do with Mikel or his house. I’m loyal to you.”

I could tell that she wasn’t lying. She meant it. The honesty shone clear in her eyes, in the set of her jaw, in the way that she looked at me with nothing but rawness in her expression.

“What does Natasha want with you?” I said, trying to get to the bottom of this—and fast.

Lillin glanced away, but only for a moment. Then her gaze was on me again, and there was a fiery sort of determination in her eyes. “They want me to work with them too. My father is sick, and my mother is staying home to take care of him. Someone from my family is supposed to help run the transports, because we cross through so much of my family pack’s property. I’ve been trying to avoid it so far.”

“You don’t want to help her?” I said, carefully watching Lillin’s face for any small changes of expression. It didn’t matter.

She was an open book.

Anything that she thought or felt was right there on her face.

Lillin shook her head. “I wanted your protection from Natasha and her family. I just... haven’t been able to get you alone when she wasn’t around.” Lillin dropped her voice and glanced over her shoulder. “I think that she’s been watching me, to see if I was going to listen to what she and her father wanted or not.”

“I can give you protection from her,” I said, no hesitation on my end. “From their whole family. It’s not going to be a problem for much longer.”

“It won’t be?” Lillin asked, and then she shook her head and waved her hands between us. “Wait, no, that sounds like I’m fishing. I swear that I’m not—I’m just talking. But I talk a lot, so if it’s a secret, I probably shouldn’t know.”

I watched her, amused.

Lillin continued, “I just wanted you to know that... that I don’t *want* to be around them, but I can’t just not or they’re going to think I’m a traitor. But a traitor to them and not a traitor to you, and I’m—it’s the opposite, you know? I’m here for you and your pack, not for theirs.”

“Breathe,” I told her. “I believe you, Lillin.”

Relief washed over her face. “You do?”

“I do. I believe you.”

Lillin let out an exhale, a soft smile curling over her features. Before she could start talking again, however, there was a shuddering sort of thump from outside. The sound was distant but still an unmistakable explosion.

Lillin, wide-eyed, all but flung herself out of the room. I was quick to follow her. Other students and staff members were spilling out of the dining hall. We followed suit. There was no actual plume of smoke or fire in the distance, but there was a lynx shifter running towards us.

He transformed outside of the dining hall, sides heaving. As a human, his silver hair was matted to his temple with sweat. He was a runner; they worked for the school but weren't exactly members of the staff.

The man said, "The tunnel has been demolished, Prime Alpha."

I just grinned at Lillin. "See? I told you. It won't be something you have to worry about for much longer."



The fight crept up on me faster than I had been expecting. But before I knew it, it was the night before it took place. A bee's nest of nerves had settled in the back of my chest, near the base of my throat. I kept shifting around, pacing through my bedroom.

I knew that if I went outside right then, I would no doubt get into a fight. And that wasn't going to be helpful. I needed my rest, I needed my energy—and I needed everyone to be on my side for this whole bullshit mess with Natasha.

Raking my hands through my hair, I veered off from the pacing path that ran a loop through the main room and ducked into the bathroom instead. There was a luxury clawfoot bathtub with a shower attachment and a great marble sink. It was old-fashioned and expensive-looking. I skipped the tub and turned on the tap at the sink, letting the water wash out cold.

Splashing it on my face didn't calm my nerves.

It just made me more antsy. And cold. Shit. Okay, that was fine. A shower, then.

Stripping out of my uniform, I turned on the shower tap instead and stepped inside. The cold water didn't shock me out of my hyped-up state of mind, so I turned on the hot and tried to relax instead. Fingers scrubbed soap through my short, messy hair, and the smell of lavender filled the room. I snorted a few times; it was Petra's soap. I liked the smell of it

normally, but tonight it just served as another reminder for what I stood to lose if this fight went poorly.

I couldn't let it.

My teeth gnashed. My body was so tense it felt like a wire about to snap in two. One wrong step, and I would just come crumbling apart at the seams. End of story, time run out.

When I realized that the water wasn't doing anything to calm my nerves, I started hurrying to get the soap washed out of my hair. It ran in rivulets down the curve of my back. The door to my room clicked open. I froze. I knew for a fact that had been locked.

Someone had picked it.

Not bothering to finish getting the soap out of my hair *or* shut off the water, I threw myself out of the bathroom with a snarl—and was met with the sight of Bree, holding a bobby pin, and Cass, looking like she wasn't sure if she should be amused or abashed.

“What the fuck,” I muttered, the fight rushing right out of me.

Bree laughed. “Sorry! We were trying to surprise you!”

“*She* was trying to surprise you,” corrected Cass, neatly tossing Bree under the bus. She cocked her head to the side, gaze raking over me. “But that’s a good look on you, Victor. You should wear it more often.”

A flush ran down my neck—not of embarrassment, but of pride and want. It was like my brain had flipped a switch. If it couldn't get into a fight, then my instincts wanted to fuck instead, and I had two beautiful women right here who were more than happy to let that happen.

With a snort and a shake of my head, I reluctantly retreated back into the bathroom to finish rinsing the soap out of my hair. I gave it a quick pat-dry and a hard head shake; the latter of the two sent droplets of water splattering across the room.

When I stepped back out, the girls were lounging on the bed like two goddesses, gorgeous and stunning. Bree tilted her



head towards me; she knew exactly how beautiful she looked. “Hey, handsome.”

Cass said, “We thought that you could use a distraction tonight. Something to help clear your mind a little.”

“You know me so well.” I went over to the bed and leaned down, curling an arm around Bree’s shoulder and kissing her.

Tongue and tooth, the taste of her fresh kill on the tip of her tongue. The copper mingled with the cherry of her lip gloss and made something animal purr to life in the back of my brain.

I ran a hand over the curve of her side, feeling the heat of her skin through her shirt. She had stripped out of her jacket, which made it easy for me to shove my hand up under that fabric and run my fingers over her bare skin.

“Hey,” said Cass, “what about me?”

I had barely turned my head away from Bree before Cass crashed our mouths together instead. She tangled a hand into the back of my short, still-wet hair. Her teeth nipped at my lower lip, but I took control of the kiss fast, climbing onto the bed and pushing her backwards so her shoulders were pressed to the mattress.

Her arms wrapped around my neck, fingers of both hands in my hair now. Each tug sent heat racing down my spine, pooling in my belly. I braced one arm against the mattress for balance and used the other hand to start undoing the buttons on the front of her shirt.

“I’ve got that,” said Bree, leaning over and pushing herself up against both of our sides. Her dainty hands made short work of the buttons. When she was finished, she was close enough to me that I could just turn my head to the side and kiss her again.

Hands settled on my bare chest, running over my pecs. Fingers brushed over the buds of my nipples, then down towards my side. Cass made an appreciative sound as she looked me over and felt me up.

It was heaven, having two beautiful women right here with me. A part of me wanted it to keep going, and another wanted to call for Petra and bring her in too. All my girls in one spot—the perfect feast of love. But I knew that Petra was much too shy for something like this, and I would have to be okay with that.

It wasn't as though I was settling, by any means. Bree and Cass were both shocks of heat and lightning. They were livewires, just waiting to be tamed.

As soon as Cass's shirt was open, Bree started to fondle the other woman's breasts, feeling the softness of her skin. While Bree played with one, I bent my head down and started to lick at the other, tongue lapping at her nipple. Lips curled around the pert bud. I gave a sharp suck, drawing a breathy moan from Cass.

"God," she said, throwing her arms up above her head. Fingers curled around the headboard of the bed. "Fuck, that's *good*."

"You know," said Bree, "you're pretty for a bear kin."

"Fuck off," grumbled Cass.

"That's my plan," countered Bree cheerfully. "Come on." She leaned up, putting her face close to Cass's. "I want to watch him fuck you. And then afterwards, I really, really want you to eat me out."

Cass groaned, and I gave a desperate sort of growl. My cock was already hard. With one last suck and nip to Cass's tit, I pulled back and rose up onto my knees. My hands dropped to my cock, curling around the base of my thick shaft.

I jerked my hand up the length of it, once, twice, and was pleased when I realized that both girls had turned their heads to watch me.

"Is that what you want too, Cass?" I asked, a hint of teasing to the words. "You want me to fuck you while Bree watches?"

Cass was not the least bit shy.

That question would have had Petra hiding her face in anything that she could reach—her hands, the pillow, the mattress—but Cass just spread her legs wider and started to work her way out of her skirt. The fabric was discarded, her panties quickly following suit.

“That’s exactly what I want,” said Cass.

She reached between her legs, now fully bare, and rubbed at her clit with two fingers. It glistened with slick moisture, pretty pink beneath a thick bush of hair. There was fur on her thighs too—the same shade as her hair—and her cute little tail was only barely visible.

I reached down, petting my palms over her furry thighs, licking my lip at the sight of it.

Before I could shove my head between her legs, Bree reached over and knocked Cass’s hand away. Then she slipped one finger into Cass’s pussy.

“Enjoy the show,” said Bree, teasing me once more. She pushed her finger as far into Cass’s cunt as she could, then added another one in alongside the first. Her fingers scissored open, stretching Cass’s pussy as far open as she could.

Cass groaned, hips shifting into the touch. “Shit, Bree! That’s—”

“Amazing?” quipped Bree. “I know!”

Then she pressed both fingers up into Cass and started to fuck her, deep and slow, getting her nice and ready for my cock. The sight was obscene and divine all at once; two perfect mates, there together, just waiting for me. Cass’s expression twisted with pleasure. Her lips parted as she gasped. Bree leaned up and kissed Cass while finger-fucking the bear kin shifter, taking pleasure in *giving* pleasure, in having me watch.

My own mouth was practically watering. I reached out and placed a big hand on the inside of Cass’s thigh, pushing it open wider so there was a better show. I didn’t know what was the prettiest sight—the two girls making out, or the sight of fingers sliding obscenely deep into Bree’s pussy.

They were both fucking lovely.

When I couldn't bear to just watch any longer, I added my own finger to the mix, pressing it in alongside Bree's. It was thicker than Bree's long, dainty fingers. Cass gasped, and her body quivered. An orgasm washed over her, wetting our combined digits.

Bree made a surprised squeak and pulled back, eyes wide. Her hand slipped free from where it was buried between Cass's legs. "Shit!"

Cass panted, her eyes closed. I left my finger inside of her, letting her stay filled as the pleasure ebbed and flowed. When she finally seemed to come down from her high, she simply spread her legs wider and stretched an arm out, beckoning one of us to come close.

"That better not be the end of it," said Cass, panting hard. "I was promised a fuck."

"Oh," said Bree, sounding as though she had just been given a gift. "I like *you*, bear kin. You have a special something, don't you?"

"You'll like me a lot more when I'm getting you off later," promised Cass. She rolled her hips against my finger, just once. "Come on, Victor. Fuck me already. That's nice and all, but I want to feel your cock in me."

"When you ask so nicely," I said, slowly pulling my finger free from her cunt, "how can I refuse?"

A long strand of slick connected my digit with her pussy. It snapped when I pulled my hand far enough away. I wiped my finger clean on the inside of her thigh, letting the fluid mat down her short fur, and then took hold of my cock.

It was easy to shift forward, pressing the head of my cock against her slicked, stretched hole. There was a brightness to her eyes, a glittering sort of want. I could feel Bree sitting right beside us, watching eagerly, even though my gaze was glued to Cass.

This? This was what I needed to get ready for the fight tomorrow. A moment alone with my girls. Something close,

something desperate.

Something that made my whole world feel *right* again.

So I pressed into Cass and leaned to the side, kissing Bree, as we listened to the bear kin shifter gasp and moan beneath me. And I knew, in that moment, that there was no way I could lose the fight tomorrow.

Not when I was getting encouragement like *this*.



Petra and I had plans for a quiet breakfast together the next morning. We debated on just not going down until the fight started, but I couldn't let anyone think that it was a sign of cowardice or fear. It wasn't. I was simply enjoying being around Petra, and just Petra.

But eventually, we both had to go downstairs to deal with the rest of the Academy. The buzz was everywhere. I could hear people whispering and conversing in hushed voices, talking about the fact that the fight would be taking place in just a few hours.

Everyone had something to say, and I wasn't interested in any of it.

Petra and I got our food and found a table on the far side of the room. We managed to sit down away from anyone else. When someone did try to come our way, Petra *growled* at them. Considering she wasn't usually much for fighting, everyone quickly gleaned that she wasn't looking for company.

And that was something that they were more than capable of understanding. They turned and went the other way, and I tilted my head back and let them.

"Sorry," said Petra. "I just don't want to share you with anyone this morning."

"Not with anyone?" I asked, sounding amused.

Her hand reached across the table and curled atop mine. “I know that I need to share you, and I don’t mind that. I like Cass and Bree a lot. But I *want* you to myself this morning. We never have time to spend with each other these days.”

It made me think of what Cass had said just the day before, when she’d brought up how I hadn’t been able to claim her. I let out a sigh. “I know. I have to figure out how to balance it a little bit better. There’s just... so much going on.”

The learning curve that I was dealing with was more than just a little insane. It felt like everywhere I looked, there was something else that had to be practiced, balanced, learned.

Petra’s gaze softened, and her ears gave a flick. “I just miss you. That’s all I’m saying.”

“Are you worried about me?” I asked, changing the subject quickly. I didn’t want to think about everything that still had to be learned and discovered.

Better yet, I couldn’t.

I had to keep myself focused on what was happening here, in the present.

Petra said, “I’m always worried about you.”

“Yeah?”

“Of course. You mean a lot to me.”

“You love me?” I asked her, gaze sharp.

“I love you,” she answered without any hesitation. “And I know that you’re strong. But I still worry about you.”

I nodded once. “This is one fight where you don’t need to worry about me.”

“Are you sure?” Petra asked. “Because Mikel...”

Mikel had almost taken my eye. He would have killed me if my friends hadn’t shown up.

“That was different. He came out of nowhere, and I didn’t have full control over my shifts—not like I do now. I didn’t have all my girls or my generals.”

I also hadn't come to terms with the violence of this world. But I had learned a lot since then. Learned how to fight, how to let my rage be a good thing, and how to use my power and my shifts in a better, more cohesive way.

This fight with Natasha wasn't going to be anything like the one with her father.

"I'm going to win," I told her. "And once I win, I'm going to settle this bullshit with the houses once and for all."

We didn't talk about the fight after that. We just had a nice breakfast, enjoying each other's company. Soon enough, Petra was getting up and leaving. She gave me a lingering good-luck kiss, then vanished.

Other students were milling out of the hall. There were no classes today, but everyone had been instructed to put on their best and attend the fight as spectators.

Shortly after she left to get ready, Davis came over. He looked almost nervous. "Hey. I wanted to come and wish you luck with the fight."

"Thanks," I told him, unable to prevent myself from being a little cocky, "but I don't need it."

"I know. But I have something that you might need."

I tilted my head back. "What's that?"

"I want you to take me on as your general," said Davis. "I wanted to take the oath, to swear it to you today, before your fight."

The more generals I had, the stronger I was. It was almost like my video games in that way; they allowed me to level up. I was able to get a better mastery over my shifts, have more energy, heal faster, and use their abilities in my human form without as many problems.

A new general right before my fight with Natasha was something that I couldn't pass up on—even if Davis and I had had our problems in the past.

But with all that out of the way, I knew that the fierce loyalty he'd had to Jak would be redirected if he became my



general. He would be just as loyal as Monty or Remmy—if not even more so.

So I nodded at him. “Alright. I’ll take you as my general.”

Davis’s gaze lit up. He didn’t ask if I was certain nor whether I wanted to do it now or later. He just dropped to one knee, right there in the dining hall. It was already mostly emptied out, but the shifters that had been straggling behind paused to watch the event.

I stood up so that I towered above him. It was an instinctual gesture, something that I had virtually no control over.

His head bowed in submission, and his eyes settled on my feet. This was more than just an agreement of words. I could feel that shift in the air again, only now it was gathering around me, condensing around me.

It crackled over my skin and pushed into my veins. My mouth was watering. I had two other generals, and had been part of this oath twice before, but it still settled something inside of me. It settled something, and it awoke something else.

“I swear to fulfill, to the best of my ability and judgment, this covenant,” said Davis, voice as serious as I had ever heard it before. “I will bear true faith and allegiance to the prime alpha, Victor; I will give to him my blood and my breath, and spill both onto the earth should that toil be requested. At his side, in his graces, I will command those given to me for protection, and I will provide the same to my alpha prime, in whatever manner is requested.”

His gaze was on my feet, but I could still feel the weight of it. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end.

The words seemed to echo around the room, as though they were being spoken by a thousand other people. I could smell them too—every other man and woman that had taken this oath. The sensation was almost dizzying. I could tell that the other shifters gathered around could smell it too.

Their heads were bowed so that they weren't looking straight at me. A strange sensation came from the audience, mingling with the weight of our ancestors. They had come here in spiritual presence, their ancestral forms clinging to this oath of loyalty.

It was not one that could easily be broken.

I responded in due turn, letting my own ancestors guide my tongue. "You who have sworn to me blood and breath, death and life—you have given to me what few others would give—in your hands, I place the bear kin and my back."

The world seemed to shudder, a breath of exhaled relief at the response. I could feel it. A new power in me. Davis had transferred a part of himself, and it sat in the back of my chest. Where my mates calmed my shifted forms, my generals gave them more strength.

I didn't know what I gave them in turn. Peace, I thought, if their expressions once the oath had been sworn were anything to go by. When Davis closed his eyes, a look of pure contentment had settled on his features.

For a long moment, he knelt there, and I looked down at him. When he finally stood up, I clasped his hand with one of my own, using the other to take hold of his elbow, and he returned the gesture. Our eyes met. I knew that this was a good decision.

Jakarta had not been a good alpha, and yet in the wake of his death, Davis had sought out vengeance for his friend. To have that same loyalty bound to me wasn't something that could be taken lightly. I wouldn't take it lightly.

The power that had settled inside of me felt like a beast. Like something that was almost alive. I could feel the way that my body was already working at absorbing it and adjusting to it.

We didn't say anything, parting ways silently. I stepped out of the dining hall and into the late-morning sunlight. My gaze swept over the terrain, but I wasn't just viewing it as the Academy grounds anymore.

I was viewing it as *my* grounds.

This place. These people. They were *mine*.

My mates. My generals. My pack to protect, my house to lead, my Academy to rule over. And there was no way in hell that I was going to let someone like Natasha show up and take it. I sure as shit wasn't going to let her show up on behalf of her father, a man that could only fight through the shadows, using others as pawns on some grand chessboard.

Well, it was high fucking time we started playing checkers.

Natasha was going down.

And after she went down, Mikel was next.



The battle was being held at one of the training fields. Bleachers had been pulled out for the occasion, and it seemed as though the entire student body had been pulled out to watch as well. Not just the other students, though. The teachers were there too.

Professor Emily Hart was head of the Alchemy and Herbology classes, and she was sitting right there next to Petra, looking just as strange and elusive as she always seemed to be. She was an avian shifter rumored to have precognitive skills. Her features were sharp and narrow, her fingers long and skinny. Bright blue-and-purple plumage adorned her features.

She kept reaching out and putting a hand on Petra's shoulder, almost reassuringly.

Professor Blue was spectating down at the corner of the stands with Professor Anders. I gave them both a respectful nod as I passed them by. A part of me wished that Professor Balboa had been here to see this. He'd been a good teacher and a strong member of the house.

His death at Beaumont's hands still stung. But it was just one more reason for me to finish things up now. I couldn't let this keep going. Mikel's reach was too long. His whole arm needed to come off, and I was going to start making hacks at it now.

Natasha met me in the ring.

To my surprise, it was Professor Blue that came up to “referee” and not Professor Anders. Then again, he had been a general for my father and now ranked among the highest of the senior alphas. Maybe I shouldn’t have been surprised that he would step forward.

He nodded at me once and then did the same to Natasha. Professor Blue was an imposing guy. He was massive, almost seven foot and with the kind of broad shoulders that made it seem like he could knock someone down with a single flick of the finger. His hair was worn long and pulled into a bun at the base of his neck, starting to streak silver through the black of it. His eyes were a sharp, piercing blue. Massive claw scars ran over the curve of his face and down over the side of his neck. They vanished under his shirt, which was a nice-enough-looking white button down.

The suit jacket that he wore was part of the teacher’s uniform, not something that he chose to put on himself. You could tell just by looking at him that he wasn’t a class-up kind of guy when it came to the way that he dressed.

He cleared his throat and said, “Today, we are here to see an ancient rite come to pass. A challenge has been made, and it has been met.”

Natasha pulled off her sunglasses and tossed them aside. For the first time, I was privy to the sight of her eyes. They were the most piercing shade of ice blue that I had ever seen.

“We fight until one can no longer be part of the battle,” said Professor Blue. “There will be no interference.”

He stepped away. That meant that not only could the lesser members of the pack not take part in this, but the generals couldn’t either. The challenge was a one-on-one battle, and I had to treat it that way.

There was no countdown. It was just known when the match would start.

Natasha shifted, and there was no longer a lithe young woman standing before me but a massive lycan with fur as white as snow. She started on all four legs but then gave a

languid, almost mocking stretch and stood up. Her arms were so long her knuckles dragged over the floor.

A thick mane of white fur clung to the curve of her neck and hung down her back between her shoulders. I had never seen a lycan whose fur color was not the same as their hair color; it struck me that, as a human, she must have dyed it religiously to keep her true fur tone hidden.

Maybe that was a Russian thing?

I didn't know, and I didn't waste time asking questions. I let my own shift take over, starting the fight in the form that was the most comfortable: my bear kin form. It was the first shift that I had unlocked. Not even a full semester ago, but it felt like an entire lifetime had passed.

Shifts happened in a matter of seconds. Heat coursed through my body. The heat pushed outwards, and my body seemed to explode into a different shape. I was no longer trapped in human form. Rather, I was a bear. My body was incredibly tall and broad, covered in thick black fur with massive, clawed paws. I appeared to be similar to a real bear but with a human's ability to walk upright. My mouth hung open, and I let out a guttural snarl.

The heat was still there. It burned beneath my skin like a fever. But it was the kind of fever that I enjoyed. Something that was almost addictive. The way that the sensation pushed at my veins, surfing up into my heart, into my chest. I could feel it under my skin.

This was natural. And it was natural, too, when I made the first move. It was a testing one. Natasha dodged, just as I thought she would. I gave a few more swipes with my front limbs, watching her carefully. She preferred being on her hind legs over being down on all four. Her motions were languid but unfamiliar.

It looked just like Professor Anders had said it would, more refined than some of the lycans I had fought during my classes. It was clear that she was a good fighter too. When she finally made her first move, the massive, glinting black claws

on her hand almost got me. Instead, strands of black hair were shaved from my face.

Rather than pull back, I ducked and went forward. I slammed my massive shoulder into her chest. She went backwards, but she hooked her long arms around my neck, claws sinking in. Blood burst from the punctures, staining my fur dark.

I let out a bellow of rage and went down too, slamming my full weight into her. It crushed her down against the ground, but I didn't linger. The moment that her grip on my neck loosened, I threw myself up and away from her. Five feet between us, and Natasha was on her feet. She got back up onto her hind legs.

I saw a shot, spinning around and seamlessly shifting from my bear kin form to my lynx shape. The sudden difference in my height meant that her strike soared through the air above my head. I was able to duck beneath it and sink my massive jaws into her lower left leg.

I ripped it out from under her. The woman hit the ground again, but I didn't let go. I pulled backwards, snarling, shaking my head and her leg at the same time. Her second foot hit me upside the head. Big black claws raked over me, nearly catching the same eye that her father had almost gotten.

I pulled backwards. Natasha twisted and followed me. Her teeth sank into my forearm, and then, snapping like a piranha, came back down three more times.

Pain surged through me, hot as a brand. I moved like it was an instinct, taking on the form of a lycan myself and going for her throat. We ended up stuck in a grapple, our front paws tangled together as we tried to outmuscle each other. Our tails lashed angrily behind us.

Our wounds bled and healed, bled and healed. The cycle made it harder for these fights to end. I needed something: a lynchpin, a new addition. A strength. A burst of something that she wasn't expecting. I grabbed onto it and pulled it over me—and suddenly, I wasn't a lycan that was fighting her, but a saurian.

My body felt strange and suddenly much colder. Bear kin ran hot, lycans were normal, and saurians... Oh, they ran cold.

Natasha wasn't expecting the change. She stumbled backwards. I was certain that she had done her research, familiarizing herself with which forms I had. I flung myself forward and knocked her back down. Saurians were the shortest of all the shifters, even when changed, but they were capable of physical strength that rivaled the lycan or the lynx.

My height might have dropped, but that didn't mean my power had. Brilliant cobalt-blue scales covered me, and I was now sporting golden eyes with reptilian slits. There was something almost raptor-like about me. My massive back foot's claw dug into the ground.

I hunkered, finding the stance that was most natural for my new form. It would have been better if I had been able to get some practice in before this, but hey, beggars couldn't be choosers, right? And I wasn't about to let this fight draw on any longer than I had to.

Saurians were incredibly fast and powerful but tired quickly, as they had low stamina due to saurian metabolism. I was able to easily get behind Natasha and deliver rapid-fire strikes at her back. The fur was thickest on her there, but my sharp talons still sliced through it and into the skin beneath.

Her white fur bloomed red. Natasha gave a howl and spun around, lashing out with her long arms. Her claws struck me in the chest, splitting my scaly hide. I let her throw me back, then dropped to the ground.

On all fours, I charged her, feinting left and then going right. She was used to enemies that were the same height as her and not used to fighting on the ground, on all fours. Her blow missed me.

I sprang up and grabbed her tail between my jaws, wrenching on it so hard that it popped, and then biting down so hard that it crunched between my powerful jaws.

With four out of the five shifts unlocked, three out of my five mates claimed, and three out of my five generals sworn in,



I had an entirely new level of power at my fingertips.

Natasha surprised me by shifting back into her human form, the tail simply vanishing. Before I could right myself, she switched again and came barreling into me as a lycan. She then used the same move on me that I had used on others in the past; while I was pinned beneath her, she slashed out at me like something unhinged.

For a moment, the pain from the assault blinded me. But maybe that was for the best, because it meant that my instinct was able to easily take over. I exploded outwards into the massive form of a bear once more, and this time, I used the natural strength to grab her by the neck and slam her back-first into the ground.

Bellowing with rage, I slammed down on top of her, four hundred pounds of bear crashing into a two-hundred-pound lycan. I momentarily considered the power, the rush. My mind filled with fleeting thoughts about how that power could be used, how much bigger I was, how much stronger.

And then I brought my massive paw down on her head, and she went limp beneath me.

Natasha wasn't dead. She was just unconscious. Her chest was still rising and falling. She switched back into her human form, a massive bruise taking up the entire left side of her face. Her bloody claw marks were starting to heal.

While standing above her as a bear, I had a choice. I was the winner of the fight. I could have killed her. Some of my pack might have wanted to see her dead.

My father would have killed her.

But I wasn't my father, and that had come to represent a source of great pride for me. I wasn't my father, and Natasha had a greater use to me alive than dead.

So I shifted back into my human form and turned to face Professor Blue. "This fight is over."

Professor Blue frowned. The look was only there for a moment, but I got the distinct impression that he wasn't happy about the fact that I was letting her live. Then he turned to the

crowd at large and announced, “The winner. Our very own prime alpha... Victor!”



As soon as the fight was officially announced as over, all three of my girls rushed me. Petra got there first, throwing her arms around me and kissing me. It was a press of lips that seemed almost frantic, and her hands tangled in my hair. Bree had no problems joining the hug, throwing her arms out and crushing her breasts against Petra's side.

Cass hung back, but only by a few steps. The moment that Bree and Petra had backed off, she leaned over and she caught my face between both of her hands, at which point she kissed me. It was passionate and loving and somehow grateful.

The crowd was cheering, thrilled that their house had won, and I looked over at Professor Blue again—but the man was gone. Instead, Professor Anders was coming over with the Academy nurse.

Nurse Bellsworth was a short, portly woman. Everyone that I had spoken with claimed that she was a different class within shifter structure, some of them citing her as an Elder Alpha, and others claiming that she was barely above being a delta. The cleaner odor that clung to her was too strong, and it was impossible to tell what she was just from her scent.

Her blouse was a little on the tight side, barely containing her breasts, and her pencil skirt clung to the swell of her hips, hanging over her thick thighs. Her blue-tinged hair was pulled up into a tight bun at the back of her head, though that didn't hide her lycan ears or the thick claws protruding from her fingertips.

“You’ve done a number on this one,” said Nurse Bellsworth. “But don’t you worry—I’ll get it taken care of. You want her taken care of, correct?”

I nodded. “That’s right. She belongs to me now—Oath-Bound. She’s not getting away from that quite so easily.”

“Then she’ll be taken care of, Prime.” Nurse Bellsworth selected two delta women, one a saurian and one a lycan, to come over and help her get Natasha up. They quickly took her off of the grounds and towards the Academy, no doubt towards the infirmary as a whole.

“You did good,” said Professor Anders. “I’m proud to have you as my prime.”

“As am I,” Fero said, walking towards us.

“Fero.” I nodded at him, a bright look settling on my face.

My own healing factor was extremely fast, on account of the number of shifts and generals I had. The majority of my wounds had already healed up, so there was nothing but bruising left behind, and even some of that had already begun to turn into a putridly healing yellow.

Cass said, “You don’t need to do anything now until she wakes up, right?”

“There is one thing I would like him to do,” said Fero.

“If this is about Lillin, I already have that covered,” I told him. “I just didn’t have time to hunt you down yesterday. Sorry, man.”

Fero shook his head. “No. It’s about you and this fight. That shift. You used your saurian form well, considering it was your first time.”

Bree snickered, clearly opting to take that as an innuendo.

Fero didn’t seem to notice her sense of humor, continuing and saying, “I would like to see you hold the shift better. Use it better.”

Professor Anders agreed, “You do need to practice it. But you’ve always picked these up fast. A natural.”

Bree snickered again. Cass rolled her eyes.

Petra asked, “Are you trying to offer him fighting lessons, Fero? I’m not sure he needs them. You saw how great he was.”

“Not fighting lessons, per se,” said Fero. He paused, tilting his head to the side. He blinked, then blinked again. The silence was just starting to stretch out to a point of being almost uncomfortably long when he said, “I would like to be your saurian general.”

Oh.

The grin that crossed my face was crooked and proud. Two generals in one day? That had to be some kind of record! I kept the crack to myself, though. Fero struck me as the kind of guy to take this seriously, and I wanted to give him that same amount of respect.

“I would be honored to have you as my general,” I told him.

Just as Davis had earlier that day, Fero took a knee before me. He looked at my feet, and the air turned static. Petra didn’t let go of me, and the weight of her body pressed up against mine felt strange as the world surged and energy swirled around us.

Fero said, “I swear to fulfill, to the best of my ability and judgment, this covenant: I will bear true faith and allegiance to the prime alpha, Victor; I will give to him my blood and my breath, and spill both onto the earth should that toil be requested. At his side, in his graces, I will command those given to me for protection, and I will provide the same to my alpha prime, in whatever manner is requested.”

And though his voice was stilted and his strange accent remained, the voices of all the other generals of the past rose up and helped steady the words. Petra’s eyes were wide. She pressed herself more tightly against my side, her fingers curled in the fabric of my shirt.

Cass and Bree had both backed up to stand with Professor Anders; it was hard to tell if it was out of respect or discomfort

at the sudden, ancient energy that was swirling through the world around us.

I told him, “You who have sworn to me blood and breath, death and life—you have given to me what few others would give—in your hands, I place the saurian and my back.”

Fero closed his eyes. His chest moved in a heavy exhale and did not rise again for a few very long seconds. Then he stood up and let me clasp his arm at the elbow. He mimicked the motion.

Fero blinked again, then again, and then he turned and left without saying anything.

Petra said, “He’s a *weird* dude.”

Professor Anders let out a bark of laughter. I had never heard her laugh before. “He’s a good student and a strong fighter. Let him help you figure out the limits of your form. Saurians have many external dangers to face.”

She left too, providing me a moment of privacy with my girls.

Cass said, “Do you know how worried about you we were?”

“I did good,” I said.

Petra asked, “What would you have done if you hadn’t been able to shift into that saurian form?”

“I still would have won,” I told her, reaching out and pressing a hand to the side of Petra’s face. I could tell that the girls were all a little frazzled, and I understood why. There had been points in that fight where Natasha was really laying into me.

I hadn’t been sure my strategies would work, but they had. Now, the girls needed a chance to just take a breath and spend some time with me. And honestly, that was exactly what I needed too.

We moved away from the training grounds, letting it fade behind us, and went towards the Academy in search of a few blissful moments of peace.



The moment that I heard Natasha had woken up, I went to fetch her. I hadn't been into the infirmary for a while. It was one of those places that you only visited if you needed to. Because shifters had such an advanced healing ability, I had found that the nurse only turned up when someone was close to death or when a healing item was used.

Oliver had been put here before Jak had been handled, and then I had ended up here myself after my first fight with Mikel. I had come close to losing my eye that day, and I was very grateful that our strange nurse had been around to make sure that I didn't.

As soon as I stepped inside, I was hit with the overpowering scent of bleach. The infirmary looked like any other school nurse's office, though there were posters of animal anatomy on the wall, along with the standards ones about human organs and bodily issues. Several cots were set up on the far side of the room, each one with an individual curtain around them to offer privacy.

All the curtains were pulled open. Natasha was sitting on one of the cots, her legs over the edge of the bed and a brush in hand. Now that I knew her hair was dyed, she seemed... more fake. Like a doll, or like someone that was hiding behind a mask. I could only assume that other parts of the young woman's façade were fake as well.

"Natasha," I said, my voice steady.

She didn't jump. I doubted that she had been able to smell me over the chemical tang of cleaner in the air, but she covered it up well. Natasha paused her grooming, setting her brush on the table next to the bed. "I was wondering when you would be here. Actually, I was expecting that you would be waiting for me when I woke up."

"I have better things to do than watch you sleep."

I could see the way that the comment made her flinch, her nose wrinkling up and her eyes squinting in the corners. She didn't like that, being treated like she wasn't a threat anymore. She wanted me to be afraid of her.

But I wasn't.

"But you are here now..."

"I am."

Natasha stood up. "I imagine you don't want to do this here?"

I didn't really care. The nurse wasn't going to squeal about anything to anyone... but I didn't like the way that the infirmary smelled. It was just as bad as her perfume, and I desperately needed some fresh air.

I gestured over my shoulder. "Follow me."

Natasha did as I commanded without argument or protest. She didn't say anything either. That was fine. I didn't mind if the woman wanted to stew in her own thoughts for a little bit.

I first led the way out of the Academy and then out across the grounds, towards the forest. We made the entire trip in silence. I wanted her to know that I was the one in charge here. That I was the one who decided when we stopped, when we talked, and what we said.

The forest was dark and welcoming. A few months ago, you wouldn't have been able to pay me to go into something like that, but now... it felt more like home than anywhere else. The vast majority of the shifts inside of me loved the forest. They felt like it was home. And that meant I felt the same way.



Not to mention that it added an extra layer of privacy for a talk with Natasha, which was vitally important. The last thing that I wanted was for her to say something and have it be spread around the campus as a rumor.

I was the prime alpha. It was my job to take problems, like Natasha and Mikel, and then handle them myself. I couldn't let a single ounce of this conversation get loose until *I* decided that it was time for the others to know. And even then, it would be my duty to decide if only my mates and my generals could be trusted with it or if the rest of the house should know as well.

The trees formed a tight canopy above us. Sunlight filtered in through the branches, dappling the ground below. A strong wind blew, but I couldn't scent any other shifters on it. Natasha did not walk with her head down; she might have lost her fight, but she was very far from being a beaten woman. She kept her chin up, her gaze sharp.

She would not risk striking at me. I could tell. But she was not about to roll over and bare her belly either.

"Alright," I said, stopping when I felt like we were deep enough into the forest. "You understand the terms of our duel, yes?"

Natasha practically deflated. "I... I lost." She hung her head. "And by rights as the victor, I must abide by your terms of the challenge."

With a deep breath, Natasha turned and knelt on one knee before placing a hand over her heart. "I am Oath-Bound to you from this day forward—on pain of death and consigning my soul to the wild abyss, I am yours, Victor Rawlings. Until the day you release me or my final breath in this life."

As she finished speaking, there was a tug in the center of my chest and a low pop as something coalesced around my heart. There was finality in her words, and the weight of them settled into me. I knew, then, that we were bound together.

An oath struck.

It was wholly unlike my bond with my generals or my mates, but it was no less important. No less permanent.

To be completely honest, I hadn't been expecting her to actually uphold her end of the bargain. If she had resisted in any way, or tried to worm her way out of the deal we made, I would have struck her head from her shoulders and shipped it back to Mikel in a box.

But it seemed Natasha had more honor in her than her father.

"You may rise," I said.

As Natasha stood, fresh earth clinging to her pants, I reached up to my neck and pulled my necklace free.

The necklace itself was dainty, a strand of silver with an odd symbol at the base: a metal eternity sign, inlaid three times. The back of it had my mother's initials carved into it.

"We're going to start with this," I told her. "Mikel wanted it as part of his deal if he won. Why?"

Natasha looked me over. "You really do not know much about your family, do you?" Her accent was thick, but she sounded more curious than mocking. "I heard that you were raised outside of our society, but I did not realize it was *this* outside of it."

"Just answer the question, Natasha," I told her sharply. "Now."

"That necklace was a gift," said Natasha, tilting her head so that she could look at me over the bridge of her nose, "from my father."

"What was your father doing giving my *mom* gifts?" I demanded.

Natasha snorted. "It was a courting gift, clearly. My house is very fond of gifts when it comes to courtships. We put great value in the things that we own. They are physical proof of our accomplishments. Our wealth. Our worth."

My mouth was dry. "You're telling me that he was trying to get my mother to court him?"

“Not trying,” said Natasha, almost flippantly. Her tone was light, but there was a sharpness in her eyes that belied the casualness of it. “They were together. They were in the midst of an affair, once upon a time. My father... He is very handsome. He has much to offer someone. Money. Power. Clout.”

I stared at her, mouth open, unable to even formulate a response.

She continued, “You will never know his kindness. You are born an enemy to him, the head of another house.” A pause. Natasha pursed her lips. “His kindness is conditional. They were together. I do not know if it was love or convenience, or if your mother simply wanted what my father could offer.”

“That’s insane.”

“The necklace is proof. It was a gift.”

“How do I know that you aren’t just making this up?”

“I am Oath-Bound now. I cannot lie to you.”

Again, I fell silent. Whatever I had been expecting to learn about that necklace, it wasn’t *this*.

Natasha tilted her head up, squinting into the trees. She had spotted a cardinal among the branches, feathers bright red and hard to miss. After watching the bird for a moment, she said, “Mikel once thought you might be his.”

“I’m not.” It came out as a snarl.

I wasn’t his blood. I knew that much for certain. I could feel it. That my connection was to this house, to the people *here*. It was a natural-born instinct.

Natasha’s lips twitched up at the very edges, but only minutely. The barest attempt at a smile, gone in seconds. “You could have been the son of either of the two prime alphas; the one in this house, or my father’s. The only way that they could know for certain was to have your father culled.”

A breath escaped me, harsh and rattling. She’d only confirmed what I’d suspected for a long time now.

“Mikel was the one who had my father culled.”

“Yes. I would offer condolences, though on my behalf—not my house’s.”

I shook my head. It should have made me furious to hear, but... I didn’t feel much of anything, honestly. I had already known that my father was culled in a territorial dispute. I had known that Mikel had a hand in it.

And I had not known my father.

“Who?” I demanded.

Natasha shook her head. “I am sorry. I do not know. My father tells me what information is relevant to my job, and that is it. He is strong. He is rich. He is *paranoid*. My father excels in twisting the members of other houses so that they come and side with him instead.” She sighed. “But that simply means that he knows how easily a side can be changed.”

The problem with being Oath-Bound was that she couldn’t directly lie to me, but that didn’t mean Natasha couldn’t obfuscate the truth, hiding it behind a mess of smoke and mirrors.

“You expect me to believe that he didn’t tell *you* anything?”

She looked at me and laughed. “You look at me and see Mikel’s daughter, but what do you think my father sees when he looks at me? I am his favorite knife, nothing more. You do not need to tell a knife anything to make sure that it cuts, now, do you?”

My lips pulled into a thin line. I growled, then snorted. “Fine. So he gave her the necklace, and he culled my father. What else *can* you tell me?”

“If you did not take on prime alpha status, that would have made you my brother,” said Natasha. “I do not know what would have happened then. I imagine that my father would have killed whichever one he did not want to be his successor.”

*Just another part of this fucked-up society at heart. To be so casual about murdering members of your own family... It's part of the reason I'm grateful my mother chose to keep me out of this world for so long.*

I just sighed and motioned for her to continue.

Natasha did, though she looked rather unhappy about it all now. Her composure was starting to slip; she could call her father a good man all she wanted, but it was damned hard to talk about someone wanting you dead and not feeling even a little bit put out by it.

“But you achieved the status of prime alpha instead,” said Natasha. “That was proof that you were not his kith.”

*Kith. Another old word in this old world.*

“There are too many loose ends, though,” Natasha said, stepping around me in a circle. The shadows cast through the forest lingered on her. “And you... you are a young man. Very new to this. Mikel thought he could clean up his mess and take greater power for himself in a single stroke.”

“That’s why he wanted the necklace back. To get rid of any proof that he might have had something to do with my mother.”

She nodded. “Correct.”

“And the girls? Petra and Cass?”

“My father does not like to be promised something that is not delivered,” Natasha said. “Collecting them is simply a matter of principle.”

“And you’re just fine with that?”

Natasha tilted her head back just a little bit. “Of course.”

No hesitation, but no emotion either. That seemed—to me, at least—more like the sort of yes that you got programmed to say; an instinctual response rather than something that was actually believed.

Not that it *mattered*.

Whatever Mikel had planned, whatever victory he'd hoped his favorite knife could gain him—I'd taken it from him, and so much more.

I had won the fight. The girls were safe. The necklace was mine.

My questions were answered. And the only thing that was left was dealing with Mikel. I had no illusions that anything but pure and overwhelming hyperviolence would be the answer to the Mikel question. But it was nothing that he hadn't brought upon himself.

This was my pack, and it was past time that sorry son of a bitch learned that.

“Alright,” I said. “You've held up all but one part of our bargain.”

Natasha looked up at me and sighed. “You want me to deliver your challenge to Mikel?”

I smirked. “And to let him know that his oh-so-favorite tool is now a weapon in my arsenal. That his daughter is now sworn to House Blackstone.” I stared her down. “How do you think he'll react to that?”

Natasha was silent for a long moment before she looked away. “He'll want me dead for daring to agree to such a thing in the first place... but even he wouldn't dare to slaughter one of the Oath-Bound. The wergild House Renoire would be forced to pay would be staggering, even for our house—and that shame would fall on his shoulders, further eroding his reputation.” Natasha shook her head. “He'll not harm me, but if you thought he wasn't out for blood before, this will only incense him.”

I spat on the ground. “Good.”

“I wouldn't be so sure of that, Victor.” She sighed. “I would tell you not to challenge him.”

“What? Why?” I frowned. “Why the hell would you care? If I die, your oath is nullified. You'll be free.”

Natasha was silent for a moment. Then the very corner of her mouth twitched up. “I always wanted a brother, you know.”

The comment was so strange and out of the blue it actually startled a laugh out of me. “Is that so?”

She chuckled before nodding. “I’ll admit, when my father first told me about you, I kind of hoped you wouldn’t be the prime alpha, just so I would have someone else to call blood. Someone else to have around that wasn’t Mikel or his army of sycophants.” Slowly, the smile fell from her face. “Though my wish was left unanswered.” When she looked up, there was steel in her gaze as she stared at me over the rim of her sunglasses. “I tell you this not out of kindness but for that fleeting hope inside me that I’m not yet ready to snuff out. Do not challenge my father. It will not end well... for either of you.”

A stiff breeze kicked up, setting the canopy overhead dancing in the wind. The sun shone through the interlaced branches, lighting up the clearing around us for a moment as the silence stretched on. I basked in the shade while the wind wicked the sweat from my brow.

But eventually, I had to answer her.

“We both know this won’t end until one of us ends it. And I refuse to keep dancing to Mikel’s whims. I will deal with him on my terms. I will not let him hide behind dispensable puppets for him to try and have me quietly killed. He is the one that refuses to bring this out in the open, so that’s exactly what I am going to do.”

“He will keep coming; that is correct. But you could have more time between then and now. Time is never a bad thing. I am well aware of the fact that you are still missing a shift.”

“That doesn’t matter,” I said without hesitation. “He’s going to keep coming after my girls, and we both know it. You said it yourself. He wants what’s owed to him. Well, they aren’t his. They’re *mine*. And the longer I put off handling him, the more of a chance there is that they’ll get hurt.”

I couldn't stop thinking about how scared Petra had been when Jak was acting up, nor the look on Cassandra's face when I'd found her bound up in that quarry. Who knew what would happen next? Plus, there were others involved too, and the whole of Blackstone House was watching me. I couldn't act afraid.

I couldn't let anyone know that I didn't think I was strong enough to handle this. I had to keep going. I always, always had to keep going.

And in this instance, I had to go straight at Mikel with everything that I had. Win or lose, the fight had to happen, and I had to be the one to start it.

Natasha frowned at my words. "You are that concerned about the women?"

"I am," I told her. "They're mine. My mates, my best friends. I love them."

Natasha blinked, and then her expression softened for a moment. I got the distinct feeling that she probably wasn't holding out hope for finding a mate that loved her enough to take on a prime alpha.

I felt bad for her... but there were lines that had to be drawn. I couldn't take on every problem in the world. The entire shifter society's many injustices weren't on my shoulders to solve.

I had to focus on this. Not on her.

Natasha sighed but finally nodded. "Very well. I will arrange it."

And that—for the moment, at least—was all there was to it.





When we returned to the Academy grounds, Lillin was sitting on the edge of the fountain. Her head snapped up when she saw us, then instantly dropped.

Natasha snorted. “Stupid girl.”

“Don’t be a dick to her,” I warned, changing our course. I was way more in control now that I had seen Natasha’s whole hand. We made our way over to the fountain.

It reminded me of the fountain in my favorite game, *Azenar*.

The spring was a magical contraption that could be visited once every twelve hours, bestowing something amazing upon your character. It was usually just a high amount of krini, the in-game currency, but sometimes it would be a new level, better stats, or something of that sort. You’d once been able to get a hundred dollars’ worth of cash-for-currency items, and I knew that if you were lucky enough, the goddess of the spring would bless you with a quest that could only be received through her. Four years, and I had not only never gotten it myself but never met anyone that had.

Just thinking about the game was enough to fill me with a bit of grief. I had poured my entire human existence into becoming a master at that game, and while Oliver and I had had a brief conversation about it a few days ago, I still missed it.

But more than that, it felt... distant. Like I had started as one thing and ended as another.

Still, it was a thought for a different time, not for today. I took a deep breath, and by the time we made it to the fountain where Lillin was waiting for us, I had swept all of those thoughts away.

God, she really was gorgeous. I was glad that we had met, even if the circumstances driving our interactions so far had been a little strange. They were still a step up from how I had first met Cass, and that had ended up working out just fine in the end.

Lillin quickly said, “I swear, I wasn’t waiting for you all. Not at first, I mean. I just like the fountain and the water. My mum used to say—well, it doesn’t matter. Just that I should have been a toad instead of a saurian for how much I like it. Did you know that some tropical regions have dolphin shifters? Not the point. Sorry.”

Lillin gave a nervous laugh.

Natasha said, “It *looks* like you were waiting for us.”

Lillin flushed. “Not at first! I just was down here for the fountain, but then the wind changed and I smelled... Well, I smelled bleach and Victor. I didn’t realize that you were the bleach... That you were with him... I mean, that it wasn’t just him. I wouldn’t have sat around if I knew that you were busy.”

“No, no, this is fine. It works out great, actually.” I gestured at Natasha. “She’s going to tell us exactly what’s going on with you, your parents, your property, and Mikel.”

“Am I?” Natasha asked, sounding amused. One perfectly plucked eyebrow was raised.

“You sure are.” I grinned. “Oh, it makes you so much easier to deal with when I can just order you to tell me everything I want to know.”

Instead of offering a glare like I was expecting, Natahsa simply chuckled. “Perhaps everyone should be Oath-Bound. It would make life so much simpler, I imagine, albeit with much less freedom.”

“You’re Oath-Bound?” Lillin asked. “But that’s not happened for, like, a long time... Like, a really long time. Like

a hundred years long.” She looked excited. Well, she looked like she was trying really, really hard to *not* look excited, but she was failing at it pretty spectacularly. “How’d you manage that, Victor? How’d you even know about that? You don’t look like the studious type—not that I’m saying you’re not smart. You just look way too handso...” She blushed and then slammed her mouth shut. “So not going to finish that sentence. Anyway, I’m rambling. You were saying?”

Natasha breathed out hard through her nose. “I’ll never get used to that mouth of yours.” She then looked at me and waved a hand absently in the air. “Fine. To answer your question, your parents will not let you stay.”

“Like, stay at home?” Lillin asked, sounding upset.

“Stay here, in this house. They are not loyal to Blackstone. They are loyal to Renoire. To my father. They will not let their only daughter stay here.”

Lillin’s face fell. “But... they still live here.”

“They did. Now they do not. They finished their move last week. By the end of the semester, they will send someone to collect you. If you do not want to go with them, then you will have to kill them.”

Lillin jumped to her feet. “No! I can’t do that! They’re my parents!” She turned her big, pretty eyes onto me. “You understand, right? I can’t. My dad—he’s already sick. I can’t just... I can’t just go in there and off him while he’s already...”

“You don’t have to go and off your father,” I said, then turned a look onto Natasha.

The woman was clearly amused, the corners of her mouth twisted up and a pleased glint in her eyes.

I told her, “Stop trying to scare her on purpose.”

“I’m not,” Natasha said. “It is a valid way to handle the matter. Killing them would be the simplest option. I thought that this house was a fan of simple solutions?”

“Natasha,” I said sharply.

The woman glanced at me, then back at Lillin. She gave another heavy sigh, another wave of her hand. Then she said, “Fine, fine. It is the simplest option, but not the only one.”

Lillin let out a heavy sigh of her own, shoulders slumping with relief. “Thank God. I thought... Well, okay, I guess that any of the other options must be better, right? What—what else am I looking at?” And then, “I can’t believe they would move like that, to a whole other house, a whole other country. They must have known I wouldn’t want to; that’s why they didn’t say anything beforehand.”

“They must have,” said Natasha dryly and clearly trying to look as uninterested as she possibly could.

“What’s the other option?” I asked.

Natasha looked at Lillin, then at me. “It is simple. If she is the mate of the prime alpha, then they will have no say over her. You will be able to order her to stay.”

Lillin’s cheeks went bright red, and she stared at Natasha as though the woman had just told us to drop drawers and fuck right there. She looked at me, then instantly became too embarrassed and dropped her gaze down to the ground instead.

She said nothing.

I said nothing.

Though I wasn’t surprised about such a rule, I hadn’t exactly expected to have my hand forced like that.

This place was so filled up with *rules*, with history, with things that happened purely because that was how it had always been. Because that was what had always been expected.

I was the prime alpha, and taking what I wanted, making the rules I wanted, and using my mates to get things done—that was likely the oldest rule of them all.

Natasha looked at us both and grinned. “You are both so shy all of a sudden. It’s actually quite cute.”

“I’m not shy,” I snapped. “I’m thinking.”

Lillin kept her thoughts to herself, her mouth closed, but the blush just spread further down the sides of her neck and vanished under the folds of her shirt. She breathed out, the sound a trembling little exhale.

“Lillin,” I said. Then I paused and looked at Natasha instead. “Leave. We’re done for now. Go speak with my generals, get them up to speed on everything, and prepare to deliver my challenge to Mikel. Monty will ensure everything is done properly.”

“You do not trust me to do things correctly?”

I shrugged. “All I am sure of is that Monty doesn’t require an oath of obedience to get things done for me.”

I had the utmost faith in Monty that he would have this deal go down exactly the way I wanted.

Natasha snorted, the sound more of a huff than anything, and nodded before making her way down the path towards the school. When I blinked, letting my lycan vision take over, I could make out a tall figure who I was certain was Monty standing near the entrance.

Clearly, he was watching for me.

I gave him an almost imperceptible nod of the head. Then, without waiting to catch whether he had seen it, I turned back to Lillin.

She was still staring at her feet, though her face had somehow grown even darker with blush. I wondered what she was thinking about. From the smell that was coming off her, I was certain that it was being my mate.

Was it polite to speak with my other girls about this first? Yeah, probably. But it wasn’t totally a requirement. I had done things solo plenty of times already, like with Bree.

Sometimes, moments came up. And sometimes, logic and instinct matched up with each other. It was all matching up right then too. I had been able to tell that there was something special about Lillin; the moment I saw her, my heart had twisted up, just as it had when I was near one of my other future mates.

I supposed that sometimes the body could tell before anything else. The heart. Whatever part of that bullshit you prescribed to. Could have been any, could have been neither.

The main thing was that I easily knocked her knees open and pushed my way between them. Lillin finally gasped and looked up at me, her eyes wide and burning with want. She was shorter than me on her feet, but it was even more noticeable now while she was sitting.

She had to look up at me to meet my gaze, which I knew was smoldering with want.

I reached out, curling one hand around the back of Lillin's neck. It was both a steadying gesture and meant to make it clear that I was interested. A show of strength and power, a flash of intimacy. I was good at this, so long as I didn't get too far in my own head.

"Victor?" Lillin said very softly.

"How could I turn down the opportunity to get a girl like you as my mate?" I asked, voice a silken purr. I bent forward just enough to enter her personal space. Her scent engulfed me, sweet and enticing, something almost spicy hidden beneath.

Hesitantly, Lillin reached up and rested one hand against my chest. Her fingers curled very slightly into the fabric of my shirt. "Really?"

"I wouldn't have said something if I didn't mean it," I told her.

I urged her to stand with my hands, but I didn't move away from her, not even a step. It pressed us together, no space between us. I wrapped an arm around her waist and held her there so that I could give her a better look over.

It gave me a chance to take in the curve of her cheeks, the slight furrow of her brow, the heat that was coming off of her skin. The way that her scales seemed to glow and shine whenever the sunlight hit them. I had never been with a saurian girl, but people talked...

All the time.

You couldn't go three days here without someone talking about the last girl they'd fucked. It was almost like an academy-wide frat house when it came to that sort of thing. Just part of shifter life. Sex wasn't just the norm; it was an essential part of our world.

So, yeah, people talked. And according to all that talk, saurian girls were a totally different breed when it came to taking a roll through the sheets.

A flush ran down my own neck. I tangled my hand in Lillin's hair and hauled her close, crashing our mouths together into a fierce sort of kiss—one that she quickly leaned into with her full body, hands to my chest, breath hot against my face.

Her teeth scraped over my lower lip sharply, and I retaliated in kind, nipping at her lower lip and then plunging my tongue inside, swiping it over cheek and fang and tongue in turn. It was hot and messy and public.

Right then and there, I was staking a partial claim on her. There would be no way that anyone could look at Lillin now and not know that I was interested. But it had to be more than that for this to work; it had to be more than just an academy interest, a schoolyard romp. It had to be permanent.

And the longer that we made out, the more I realized that I was totally good with that.

A connection pulled at my chest, twisting tighter and tighter until my breath was her breath and her breath was mine. I shoved a hand up under the back of her shirt, just enough to flatten my palm against the small of her back. Bare skin to bare skin.

“Victor,” Lillin said when we finally parted. Her lips were kiss-swollen and red.

I couldn't resist nipping them again, just to feel the soft give between my teeth and hear that surprised but pleased-sounding squeak that she made.

“What do you say? We solve a couple of problems, have some fun... get to know each other a lot better?” I curled my

fingers lightly over her skin. I could already tell the answer.  
“You feel it too, don’t you?”

Lillin’s flush darkened. “I didn’t want to come off as—you know. Full of myself.”

She was going to be full of something soon enough...

I kept that thought to myself. Out loud, I told her, “You’re not full of yourself. But you do *feel* it, right?”

“It’s like... this is correct,” said Lillin, her voice soft. As seemed to be the case with her, however, the more she spoke, the more energy and confidence she gained. She was a bit of a talker; I couldn’t help but hope that continued into the bedroom. “Like I looked at you before, when you first came here, and I just knew that this was supposed to happen. I don’t know how to describe it. I just... I could feel it.”

I let her talk, a small smile curling over my features.

“I just *knew* that things were... We were going to—” She caught herself, seemingly losing her nerve for a moment and then quickly amending, “Not this! But get close to each other, I guess. I knew that we were going to be *near* each other more often.”

I kissed her again. “Stop worrying so much. You can just say what you’re thinking. I want to hear it.”

“Not a lot of people do,” admitted Lillin. “I talk too much, and I talk too much because I think too much, and... I know that I can be a lot.”

“Yeah, sure, but I think that’s great,” I told her. “And the people who think you talk too much are fucking idiots. I bet you have a lot going on in that head of yours, and they’ve all just been too fucking stupid to realize it.”

I kissed her again, before she could try to protest or push back against the comment, and swallowed down her words. I pressed close to her until we were flush against each other—until there was nowhere else for us to go. Only when we were both breathless did I pull away.



I had to force myself to let go of her back and waist, taking hold of her hand instead. Without saying anything, I turned and started to lead her across the Academy campus and into the main building, towards the alpha house. I kept stopping to kiss her.

Couldn't help it.

Now that I knew it was an option—now that I knew this was a thing—I wanted more of it. More of her. I wanted her so close to me that it was endless, impossible to tell us apart.

In the stairwell, I pressed her up against the wall, our mouths crashing together in a fierce sort of kiss. I held her there, one hand to her hip, and kissed her until she was the only thing that I could taste.

I could feel the instincts buried inside of me starting to come to life, flaring up. *Mate, mate, mate*. That was the only thing going on in my mind. At the front of it, at least.

Under that, there was human rationale. That she was pretty, that she seemed fun, that this was the best course of action for House Blackstone as a whole. I needed her to understand all of that, but I also desperately wanted her to understand that this was more than just a political move on my end. This was something deeper than that. This was *love*, and *lust*, and *fate* all rolled up into one.

At some points in my time here, as part of this society, I had found a lot of boon in trying to untangle all of those things, figuring out where one ended and the other began. But I had also started to accept that there was just... no way around the fact that they were all part of the same whole.

That the knots were meant to be there. That it was fine to just let them exist in this state, this point of stasis.

I barely was able to pull myself away from her and keep on the journey to my room. The closer to my bed we got, the more ravenous I became. The harder it was to keep our hands off of each other. Lillin met me in kind, shyness fading away in the wake of my sheer enthusiasm.

We managed to reach the room, though I had a hard time getting the key to unlock the door just because I kept fumbling it and looking over my shoulder at her and wanting her. Oh, shit, I wanted her so badly it was enough to cloud my mind completely.

But the door did click open eventually, and I was able to grab Lillin, who gave a shrill but pleased-sounding yip as I hooked my hands around her waist, spun her around, and practically tossed her onto the bed.

“Door,” she reminded me breathlessly.

I kicked the door shut with one foot and looked her over, taking in the flush on her skin and the mess of her hair... and relishing in the fact that she was about to be mine.

Mine for now.

Mine to keep.

Mine forever.



Everything that the people here at the Academy said about saurian girls? They were right.

Lillin was the sort of fun in the bedroom that made all the weight of my duties worth it. And in the morning, we had another quick round, her tongue—long and slender—around my cock, my hands in her hair, my fingers in her pussy, her skin against mine.

The shower was softer. The water crashed down over our skin. We had the water turned up hot, hot, hot to make sure that it was warm enough for her. Lillin was cold-blooded, like most reptiles, and the colder she got, the worse she felt.

So the water came out hot enough to turn our skin pink, and I marveled at the bruising on her neck where I had placed the mating bite. She was mine now, all the way through.

Lillin leaned against my bare chest, her arms looped lightly around my waist, and hummed slightly.

“You like singing?” I asked her, stroking a hand over the bare, wet curve of her back.

“Mhm. Sometimes. Not really singing. I don’t have the voice for it, and I have a hard time remembering the words. But sound, music, that sort of thing, I like that a lot. Sorry. Was it bothering you?”

“No, not at all,” I told her. “I liked it.”

She gave a huff of laughter. “Okay, good. I’m glad.”

I let the blunt curves of my nails brush over her back. There were welts there from scratching at her skin the night before. She shuddered anytime I touched them, and made these soft, pleased sounds in her throat when I flattened my hand out and started to rub the last of the tension out of her muscles.

After the shower, I knew that it was time to introduce Lillin to the other girls. A part of me was a little nervous that Cass might get jealous—but then I thought about how well they all worked together and got along, and how they looked out for each other, and that concern faded away.

Besides, a prime alpha was meant to have five mates.

The first Primogenitors were five brothers who offended Agnon by stealing fruit, meat, and mead from his temple. They were cursed with their affliction and dispersed across the world to live out their days. These first primes couldn't control their urges. Those that survived their attacks shifted into the Five Aspects, which would later become known as lynx, lycan, bear kin, avian, and saurian.

That was how their society started. They were the very first prime alphas. To make sure that things maintained an even balance and no one brother grew more powerful than the others, each prime took a mate from all of the aspects: lynx, lycan, bear kin, avian, and saurian.

That was a tradition of sorts that had carried on through the years, long into modern time. They thrived, the first primes, having no rivals other than each other. And they broke off, eventually, into houses. Greater packs that had more power than the scattered ones. But many of their actions became routine.

Five generals, five mates, something from each phenotype. It had settled power struggles, and it had settled an internal power too. And it did the same in the modern era. We had so much inside of us, energy-wise, that it could be hard to keep under control. Every day we got up, and there were five beasts within us, each one fighting for control and a place of power, trying to make sure that the *next one* was a little weaker.

By having a general and a mate for each respective phenotype, we were able to calm those urges and keep everything on an even keel. It also gave us a stronger standing with the individual alphas that we dealt with. Remmy hadn't been willing to take on a role as my general until after I had unlocked that shift, and that was how a lot of alphas worked.

They needed to have a prime that understood what their unique instincts were like—and understood what their house as a whole was like. They needed to have one that *meant* something.

So, the girls, I decided, would understand taking on a new mate. And they would understand picking Lillin, once I filled them in on what was going on.

We made our way through the building and out to the dining hall, which was already jam-packed with people trying to get an early bite to eat. Classes were still stubbornly in session, though I had been made exempt from them by the Dean to ensure I had enough time to deal with Natasha, Mikel, and any lingering upsets over the betrayal of Professor Beaumont just a few weeks back.

My three girls were already at one of the tables waiting for me. I was sure they could tell that Lillin was a mate from instincts and smell alone. None of them asked what had happened, though Bree was quick to lean forward, look Lillin up and down, and announce, “Alright, I can see why you went with her.”

“Bree,” scolded Petra, a little pink-cheeked from the lycan's antics.

Bree shrugged. “What? I'm giving her a compliment. Anyone ever tell you that you should loosen up a bit?”

“You all know Lillin,” I said, sitting down at Petra's side. The moment my ass hit the bench, she was leaning against me.

Petra had been my very first mate. We had a different bond than the others. I wasn't just her prime; I was her lover, her mate, and the man that she had lost her virginity to.

“Hi,” Lillin said.

Not wanting things to be awkward or to linger on the subject of Lillin joining us for too long—she looked pretty embarrassed already, even as she sat down across from Bree and next to Cass—I gave them the shortened version of why Lillin’s name had been in Beaumont’s box and what was going on with Natasha and Mikel.

I told them about the necklace too, but I also knew that they were the *only* ones who would ever hear that part of the story. My mates and I had a special bond. I would do anything for them. I would include them in anything. And they were going to be the people who saw me at my best and my worst.

This necklace didn’t really have anything to do with the house. It confirmed what I already knew, sure. Mikel had killed my father. Everyone already knew that. Natasha, though, hadn’t known who had pulled the trigger.

And the world didn’t need to look on my dead mother in a bad light.

She was a good woman. I would never know what she was offered, the reason that she had considered going with Mikel. I didn’t need to. Neither did anyone else. Because at the end of the day, she’d chosen to fully leave the society of shifters to get away from Mikel.

She’d chosen to raise me as a human, just so there was no chance that Mikel could get us.

So that part—that necklace—could stay as an answer just among us.

When we finished breakfast, it was Cass who suggested, “You know, you could probably get some good tips from Lillin on fighting as a saurian.”

Lillin’s whole face lit up, as though the prospect of being helpful was too great for her to ignore. She bobbed her head. “Yeah! I mean, I’m not the best fighter out there—you know, I’m not anywhere near as good as Fero or his beta—but I’m not bad either. And you just got that shift, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, I did.”

“Wow. You picked it up so fast, I never would have guessed that you were just starting out. I mean, I could, because you didn’t use any of *our* moves, but the way that you were in control of your body—” Lillin snapped her mouth shut, cheeks going pink, as though realizing exactly what she had just said... or maybe she just hadn’t meant to be talking that much.

Either way, she stopped.

Bree knocked her foot against Lillin’s ankle under the table. “No, no, keep going. I totally agree with you. Victor knows how to move his body in ways you would *not* believe.” She smiled with all of her teeth, sharp and playful. “He isn’t just fine to be around; he’s a real treat to watch too.”

I couldn’t help but think about the way that Bree had looked at me while I was fucking Cass. The way that her hot gaze had practically burned itself into the back of my mind, the back of my neck. Her hands on my hips, the way that her tits had pressed to my back as she reached around me towards Cass and—

Down, boy! I had to stay focused. Just because last night and this morning had been a little break for some fun, that didn’t mean I could spend all day thinking about it. I had to keep on top of things and make sure that I *wasn’t* getting totally distracted by, well, the world as a whole. And my super-hot mates.

And the way that Bree’s pretty pink tongue darted out over her lower lips, her gaze hot even now as she looked at me from across the table.

Cass broke the moment with a snort and a roll of her eyes. She stood up, cute little bear ears twitching, and tilted her head to the side. “How about we focus on the parts of his body that are actually important right now?”

“I think his cock is always important,” quipped Bree, though she rose to her feet as well.

Lillin gave a little snicker and stood up, tucking a loose strand of hair behind one ear. “Did you really want *me* to show

you how to fight as a saurian? Fero would do a better job of it.”

“Fero’s going to come out and meet me for a training session later today,” I said, “but it’s best if I learn as much as I can, as fast as I can, from as many people as I can. That’s what Professor Anders said anyway, and I’m pretty hesitant to ignore her advice.”

“She would eat you if you did,” said Petra, the last one at the table to stand up. She put a hand on my arm, rose onto her toes, and pressed a kiss to the soft of my cheek. “I have to get to class, or *my teacher* is going to eat *me*.”

“Sexy,” said Bree with another howling laugh.

“Down, girl,” Cass replied with a smirk.

Petra rolled her eyes. “Good luck today. Come find me if something happens, alright?”

“I will,” I promised her, not even bothering to hide the fact that I was staring at her ass when she walked away.

“Come on, handsome.” Bree looped her arms around me. “Let’s go and see what this one has to show you.”





We made our way out to one of the spare training grounds. There were several set up around the Academy campus. Sex was a big part of shifter daily life, yes... but so was fighting.

That had been another thing that was hard to wrap my head around. I'd once been a law student. Now? I was the head of a violent, bloodthirsty, lust-drunk community of magic-wielding shifters. It had been a big jump. My reluctance to kill others had held me back at the start.

I liked to think that I had been able to find a balancing line between the two mindsets without having to fight too hard. That was the only good thing that Beaumont had ever done.

Shown me that, sometimes, killing your enemy was the right move to make.

As we made our way to the training ground together, Lillin admitted, "I don't know too much about, like, actively teaching someone. But I'll try."

"You can just show me what you do," I said. "I've got a handle on the way it feels to turn. I just need to know some of those secret moves. You know, something that you only know how to do when you've been one for a while."

There was a moment of thought on Lillin's end, and then she nodded, smiled, and shifted into the most gorgeous saurian I've ever seen. Her scales were polished, her tail was long, and her claws shone like daggers. She clicked them together—*click-click-click*—and then churred at me from deep in her throat.

I returned the sound, easily taking on that form as well. It was a strange one still, though I knew from experience that each time I shifted, I would become better, more familiar with the way that my joints matched up.

It wasn't something that a lot of people thought about, but when we shifted, our whole bodies seemed to change. It was a rapid rearranging of bones, and one that took up a great amount of stamina. That was why we spent so much time trying to eat and hunt when we weren't shifted.

Our bodies needed a constant influx of energy. One of the greatest crimes and worst forms of torture, according to our currently on-hiatus history class, was to refuse to give another shifter any food. It could wreak havoc on their body three times faster than it would on a human.

This wasn't a true training session—not one that was focused on fighting, at least.

Lillin moved in low, slow forms. She showed me what it was like to slip and dodge, to use the tail to sweep legs from beneath someone else. We grappled slowly, and it let me learn what it was like to go up against someone in the same shift form as me. It also helped me figure out how to shift my own weight.

Even though it was hot out, I didn't find myself getting overheated the same way I might have in the form of a bear kin. There was no fur, and my cold-blooded form absorbed the heat like it was a second energy boost. Forget the espressos—the sun was my own personal energy injection.

Lillin darted towards me suddenly. I swerved out of the way, easily avoiding the hit, then swept out with my tail to knock her off balance. She dropped to the ground, rolled, and sprang back up with her tail coming first, hitting me upside the head even before her feet had touched the ground.

It sent me flying backwards. I hit the ground and rolled.

Lillin seemed to panic, dropping into her human form even though there was no reason to alter her shift. "God," she said,

hands coming up to cover her mouth, “I’m sorry! Are you okay?”

I had to change back into my human form to answer her, rising to my feet and raking a hand through my hair to push it out of my face. I desperately needed to go get it trimmed up. “I’m fine, Lillin. Don’t worry about it so much. That just caught me by surprise; it didn’t hurt me. And that’s the point, right? I need to know all those tricks.”

“Are you sure?” Lillin asked, hurrying over to me. She prodded at my face with her fingers, but the blow hadn’t even been bad enough to leave a bruise behind.

With a relieved sigh, she pulled back.

“I told you, I’m fine,” I said, reaching out and running my fingers through her hair, tucking it behind one ear.

Petra said, “He looks tough, and he’s even tougher than he looks. You should see some of the things he can pull off in a fight.”

Bree nodded. “She’s right. That tussle with Natasha was just the tip of the iceberg. He’s not our prime for no reason.”

“I wasn’t trying to insult him,” said Lillin, looking upset all over again.

Cass told her, “Relax. The guy doesn’t get insulted... at all.”

“Not true,” I said with a crooked grin. I wrapped an arm around Lillin’s shoulders and pulled her closer to prove that I wasn’t upset about anything. “I get offended. Just not by pretty girls.”

“What about by handsome generals?” Monty called out from behind me.

I turned to look the big guy over, pretending like I had to give it some thought. Then I joked, “Nah, I don’t think you could offend me either.”

“And him?” Monty jerked a thumb over his shoulder to where Fero was coming up after him, the saurian shifter moving a little more slowly than the bear kin general.

“Depends on whether his scales are shinier than mine,” I said sagely.

Lillin giggled and pressed her face into my chest, her cheeks gone red. In hindsight, that might have been some kind of saurian innuendo. Oops. That was totally not my actual intention. Uh-oh. Well, anyway, the words had been said.

Fero just rolled his eyes. “I’ve come to help with your training. You have a new shift. You need as many valid ways to use it as possible.”

“That’s great,” I told him. “Monty, you going to practice with us? I don’t remember when you last did a round with a saurian.”

“Not for a few weeks, at least.” Monty cracked his knuckles and rolled one shoulder, then the other. “I think that going a round with the three of you sounds like it could be fun.”

“Alright,” said Fero. “Then we start.”

He shifted into his saurian form without hesitation, and just like that... the practice fight was *on*.



It might have just been a practice match, but I was exhausted by the time that it was done and over with. I could barely think straight and was so slicked in sweat that even being partially cold-blooded didn't make it feel any less like I was melting into a Victor-shaped puddle of goop.

I didn't drop down onto my ass, but I sure wanted to, wiping at my face with the back of one hand.

"I think there was a noticeable improvement in your form," said Petra. The girls had turned into a bit of a guidance system, acting as observers for a fight that bounced wildly between actual tussling and just showing off our forms for each other.

"She's right," said Bree.

Cass pointed out, "No one's talking about his ass."

"There's been no change in his ass," Bree said. "That's been perfect from the start. I'm talking about the rest of him, same as you!" Her tail gave a wagging *thump*. "I don't think that there's ever been a guy as *quick* to pick up on his prime shifts. I mean, do we ever hear about that?"

Cass shook her head. "No one talks about it. Most of the time, the shifts are gained in private. You know, because they're already being raised by a prime alpha."

Lillin changed back into her human form. Unlike me, she had no problem dropping down onto the ground and stretching out on her back. A thin shimmer of sweat coated her skin,

making it almost glimmer in the sunlight, and when her scales caught that light, they turned into jewels embedded in her flesh.

Not to mention the fact that her blouse was clinging to her form, giving me a great show. Talk about a killer reward for my hard work, right?

“They’re right,” said Fero. “You’re doing better already. I just do not know if I would rely on this as your main form in a fight. There is a discomfort in it. What throws you off?”

“I think the size,” I admitted. “I feel most confident in my bear kin form, and it’s big. Bigger than the others.”

Fero nodded. “You should try to travel in the saurian shift. Practice here, in the forest around the Academy. Get used to the change in height and weight. Let your soul adjust to the body it is placed in.”

“Hey,” I said, perking up, “that’s from *Azenar*!”

“It is,” said Fero, tilting his head to the side. “You play it?”

Monty groaned, dropping back into his human form. “I’m tapping out. If you all are going to talk games, I’m going to get to my next class.”

“I have to go too,” said Bree. She stood up and stretched her arms above her head, shoulders rolling and breasts pressed out on purpose as she stretched her spine. “Sorry, lovers.”

“Be careful,” I told Bree. Then I watched as they headed across the field, turning back to Fero once they’d gone. “What do you mean?”

He wiggled his hand. “It is polite to introduce yourself first.”

I laughed. “Yeah? We’re going to apply high-society manners to *Azenar*?”

“The highest society of them all.”

“Fine, I’m Shadowclaw.”

I had been playing *Azenar* for almost four years now, and during that time, I had managed to become one of the highest-

ranking players in the game. My character was a Blood Cult Barbarian, making use of leather armor that had been blessed by a goddess in a hard-to-reach land. The armor was one of the best in the land and had been stained crimson from battle.

It looked killer, even on the screens here at the Academy. Granted, I hadn't been able to log on in ages. I had probably lost a lot of my street cred. Virtual street cred. It might not have been the same thing but still... it was something. And it was one of those somethings I actually missed.

I had lived and breathed *Azenar* before coming out here. The graphics were great, especially for an MMORPG like that one, the gameplay was fun, and the quests were great. There was always a new campaign going on, and they were usually multitiered, allowing even the rookies to take part without too much trouble. Every part of that map had been memorized.

I was about as big of a nerd for it as you could get. The merchandise wasn't my thing, but I had a couple of stickers slapped onto my water bottles. It was the only thing that I had done that for, which went to show exactly how much I had liked the game. How much I had lived it, breathed it, wanted to be the best at it. No other MMORPG seemed to compare.

And then it had just... become something that was a little too difficult to fit in. Not my greatest moment—that was for sure. But it was just how things tended to go sometimes, I supposed. Saving the lives of my girls had been more important.

The little bit of downtime that I had these days was spent, well, not being downtime at all. It was spent doing this. Training. Practicing. Trying to get better, trying to get stronger, trying to figure out everything there was to figure out about being the prime.

The game? A thing of the past.

My love for it? Still very much there.

“Shadowclaw?” Fero's gaze brightened, and he stepped closer to me. A strange smile split across his face.

“Seen me on the leaderboards somewhere?” I asked, unable to keep the pride out of my voice.

“Something like that,” said Fero. “I’m Pendragon.”

“No shit?” I couldn’t keep the surprise out of my voice. Pendragon had been one of my closer friends in *Azenar*, and we had even teamed up against some of the newer campaigns that the game released. The guy had been smart, quick to act, and always willing to jump in and help with exploration. “Pendragon, seriously?”

“I didn’t think I would ever meet the man behind the mask,” said Fero. “And it turns out that I have known him for a while.”

“It looks like I’m interrupting something,” said Professor Blue with a rumble of amusement. We both turned to look at him, surprised that he had come out.

“Oh, Professor.” I gave him a smile and wiped my forehead off again. “No, not anything special. We were getting some training in.” I clapped Fero on the shoulder. “And it turns out that we knew each other before the Academy.”

Fero nodded. “He has always been a good leader. Perhaps we should be less surprised to find that he is a good leader here too.”

Professor Blue tilted his head to the side, clearly curious about that... but just as clearly in too big of a hurry to get involved. Probably a lucky break on my end. Trying to explain the concept of *Azenar* to someone like Professor Blue was sure not on my top ten list of things that I wanted to do today.

He made that sound in his throat again—more animal amusement than human interest—before saying, “If you’re done, I would like to steal you for the time being, Victor. The second half of the winnings will need to be collected soon.”

“You mean the meeting with Mikel?” I asked. “If so, I’m already on it. Natasha will be delivering my challenge to Mikel.”

Professor Blue nodded. “Good. But we still need to discuss the finer details of that beforehand. Simply throwing down the



gauntlet isn't going to cut it with something like this. There are formalities that must be adhered to when issuing an official challenge—unless, of course, you wish to do as Natasha did and simply show up to his residence... But such methods are... unrefined, so to speak. I would prefer to maintain the dignity of House Blackstone when issuing a challenge from this institution.”

The undertone of his message was also clear. This was something he didn't want to hash out in public. After all, there were too many sharp ears at the Academy, and not all of them were loyal to House Blackstone.

There was something in the air around us. A shiver trailed down my spine.

I frowned, trying to figure out what might be causing that sensation. A sniff proved that no one else was around. Could it just have been leftover unease? The kind of sensation that stirred up just at the thought of someone listening in?

Fero was finetuned to me already, it seemed. He was clearly going to be a trusted general to have on hand.

He took a step towards me, put his hand on my shoulder, and said, “I will let Monty know. Then maybe we can go to the spring later, hmm? For luck?”

A trip to the springs would mean a serious stroke of good luck indeed.

“Sounds like a plan,” I told him.

Professor Blue didn't turn and leave. He waited, instead, for Fero to back up and go. The balance between a senior alpha and a general was tricky.

The general technically had more clout in the bounds of a house, but we were technically still in school—which meant that a certain level of respect still had to be applied to the senior alphas that were teaching us. The fact that we would find this balance shifted even after we graduated didn't help matters.

And Professor Blue was an extra-special case. He'd been a general before he stepped into the role of senior alpha. The

general for my father, more specifically, and a longtime family friend.

So... why did that uneasy sensation get even worse once Fero left and it was just the two of us? It was almost like there was a growl inside of me, sitting in the back of my chest. No noise. Just the sensation that I *should* be snarling.

I swallowed it down. For the moment, I figured it was best to brush it aside. My nerves were going haywire, and we were about to discuss the forthcoming confrontation with Mikel, one of the strongest prime alphas in the region.

Of course I was on edge.

It would have been stupid if I wasn't.

Professor Blue waited until Fero was gone from sight—though his scent still lingered—before asking, “Spring?”

“It’s a modern thing,” I said. “Online.”

Professor Blue gave me a dry look. “I’m not senile. I understand being online. You don’t need to specify it’s *modern*, as if I’m stuck in some Watsonian past.”

“Sorry. It just...” I shrugged, trying to pass it off. “Seemed easier than trying to explain all of the lore attached to it.”

“It’s an in-joke,” said Professor Blue bluntly. “You could have just said *that* about it.”

My cheeks flushed a little, but then I gestured to hurry us along. Professor Blue shook his head, leading me away from the training grounds and towards the main Academy building.

Whatever we were going to discuss about this meeting was clearly of high importance. Otherwise, we would have just stepped into an empty classroom.

Hopefully, it wasn’t even *more* bad news to try and deal with. I was almost desperate for a break.



Professor Blue taught the hand-to-hand combat class, which was where we learned to fight in human form. And he taught *everything* that had to do with the subject, no matter how mundane it might have seemed at the time. He taught us where to strike for a maiming blow. Where to strike to kill. How to fight to scare someone off or prove a point, and how to fight to defend yourself. It was like a combined health class and self-defense class, with a wide variety of mixed martial arts thrown in as well.

And even more importantly, it was a lesson that we could use no matter our form. There would be points in our lives where we were attacked or challenged in a high-human-density area, which meant that we wouldn't be able to shift, lest we alert normal humans to the existence of our kind.

Not to mention the fact that there were special collars that could totally cut you off from your shifts. They were supposed to just be used by the shifter-kind officers—the people that handled small skirmishes and brought the big ones to the attention of the prime—but things never worked out that way.

I had already seen how easy it was for those collars to fall into the wrong hands and for your powers to be removed at vital moments. Shifter trafficking, as it turned out, was something of a big crime. I had only seen it on a small-scale level, with Cass, but I had heard through the grapevine that some states and certain countries had large-scale problems with it. If you got caught up in that, you were going to need to know how to fight without your shifted form.

He was the kind of teacher that tried to put everything into place, making his lessons clear. He knew what he needed to teach you, and he would be damned and determined if you didn't learn how to do it before the semester was over.

I had never been much for fighting before I came here and had this issue crop up. The first time I shifted, it had been... something else. Something hard and painful. My body hadn't known what was happening. My brain hadn't known what was happening. And my emotions had gone all out of whack.

Bear kin ran hot, and that wasn't just with their temperature. They were angry, especially when they didn't know how to control themselves. I had gotten into a fistfight with someone at my dorm and had broken their jaw in the process.

It was the first fight that I had ever been in. It was far from the last.

Because of the nature of his class, the room itself was set up differently. There was a large, expensive-looking desk at the head of it, alongside a great big chalkboard that had various parts of shifter anatomy outlined on it.

There were chairs at the far back, but only one row of them. Most of the students had to stand there, and they were just shit out of luck if they got tired. The rest of the room was dedicated to the training field, where he did the demonstrations that were needed for the class.

He sat down behind the desk and gestured for me to fetch a chair. I dragged one from the back of the class up to the desk and sat down. The last time I had been in here for a "talk" with Professor Blue, it had been about generals.

And my mom.

It struck me, suddenly, that he might have already known about Mikel's affair with her. That he definitely did. But he had refused to tell me.

Was that it? Was that why my instincts were flaring up now? Why they were throwing a fit? He had refused to tell me

about the issues with my mom, and now... a part of me didn't want to trust him.

I guessed that was why I had been told to pick my own generals. I couldn't reuse the ones my dad had. There would always be secrets.

I took a deep breath. "Alright, so... what exactly are the formalities you wanted to discuss away from the public? Natasha didn't mention any of this when we talked."

"Speaking with her freely could be dangerous." Professor Blue's nostrils flared for a moment, but he quickly got himself back under control. "Even if she is Oath-Bound, there are many ways to work around such limitations."

I nodded. "As I am finding out. But that doesn't mean I should just discount an asset so freely." I stared him down. "She has her uses and a very short leash. I can handle her." With a roll of my shoulders, I softened my gaze. "In the meantime, let's just focus on what *you've* come up with." A pause. I tilted my head just a little bit. "Professor."

The added title wasn't enough to totally smooth things over. I had ruffled feathers. But so had he. For the first time, my irritation had shifted to the older bear kin.

I had to pull it back. This wasn't the time to be making enemies. I had to make my house appear to be a united front.

"I'm open to whatever suggestions you might have. You're right that if we are going to do this, it should be done properly."

"I would suggest," Professor Blue said slowly after a moment, seemingly trying to decide if he should be dealing with me as the prime alpha or as his student, "that we have this meeting on neutral grounds."

So, he'd decided to treat me as the prime alpha.

Very good choice on his end.

"And I would think that a state border would do best," Professor Blue continued.

“How is that neutral? All the states are under House Blackstone.”

“True. But a border is still a... sign of a joining. It would do us better to pick something that isn’t strictly within our power. A place where two states have already decided to make amends. Where two houses could figure out what was going on without as much weight on the terrain.”

I didn’t really see how being on a state border changed that much, but I nodded anyway. That was what the senior alphas were for. To help me view things from a different perspective and make sure that we were able to get the job done. To teach me.

I was pretty sure that Professor Blue had volunteered for this sort of closer mentorship role. I wondered sometimes, briefly, if he’d known me when I was a baby. You know, way back when I was too small to remember anything?

Didn’t matter.

Dealing with Mikel mattered. There would be time, when all was said and done, to piece together my childhood.

I leaned back in my chair. “What border were you thinking? Something close by, I would imagine.” I chuckled. “As we both know, Mikel is still Stateside.”

He nodded. “There is a dense pine forest in the stretch of land between New York and Canada. It’s shifter-owned, and unless you happen across the world’s unluckiest hiker, you’ll be completely uninterrupted by humanity.”

“Smart. Isolated—away from anyone—and if it’s so remote, the air will be pure enough to scent any approaching shifter from a mile out. We can keep anyone from interfering.”

“Mikel wouldn’t,” Professor Blue said. “It would bring him to ruin to cheat in an official challenge.” He shook his head. “If anything, you’ll need to be careful on the trip to the location.” His eyes darkened. “Anything can happen in the wilds, after all. I wouldn’t put it past Mikel to try something.”

I simply shrugged. “If he does, he does. It’s not like I haven’t withstood every threat he’s sent my way so far. Even if

he gets desperate, I'll have my generals and mates with me, not to mention Natasha at my side. Even Mikel can't overwhelm a force like that so easily—not without putting himself and his generals in front of us.

“And if he does that, then I still get the fight I'm looking for—but I get to bring friends.”

Professor Blue sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Not to imply disrespect, Victor, but Mikel is far more experienced than you are. Even if he plays it fair, it will not be an easy battle.”

“And?” I said, rising from my chair. “Is that supposed to matter? I'm not going to let him keep coming into my world, my house, and trying to rock it apart. This is *mine*.” Threaded into my words was a certain venom that I hadn't even intended but absolutely meant.

The house. The shifters here. The Academy.

Mine. Mine. Mine.

The girls that he kept making a play at.

Mine.

Those who had sworn in as my generals. The alphas in my employ. The teachers here.

It was all mine.

And I was tired of this Russian bastard thinking that he could just show up and take whatever he wanted—what, because of something that my mom did? Because he looked at me and saw a human chump that didn't know how the shifter world worked?

“He's too cocky,” I said, finally lowering back into my chair. “Mikel's gone so long with everyone just throwing themselves at his feet, he hasn't even stopped to think about the fact that I might know what I'm doing. I'm a natural prime alpha—even a blind man could see it. So if he thinks for one second that I'm afraid of challenging him, he is dead wrong.”

Professor Blue said nothing, but I could feel the way that his gaze swept over me again, sizing me up. I tilted my head

back and met him head-on, and I guess that he must have liked what he saw, because he gave me a single nod of the chin.

“Perhaps you are right.” He grinned, and there was warmth in his smile. “You are so much like your father in all the ways he wouldn’t have wanted. Your courage and determination are so like him that I forget who I’m talking to sometimes.” He sighed. “You lack your father’s ruthlessness... though even I’m wondering if that is such a bad thing. Change is coming to shifter society, Victor, and I believe you are the catalyst for all of it.”

It warmed a long-forgotten part of my heart to hear those words. To think, even for a second, that I was like my father—a man I had never met.

“Thank you, Professor.”

“You are more than welcome.” After he spoke, though, he suddenly paused and glanced toward the door.

I did the same, but no one came in, and when I pricked my ears, no one was audible in the hallway either.

I looked back to Professor Blue, taking in the man’s broad shoulders and the power that he exuded even here. We might have had some personal issues to work out—okay, *I* might have had some personal issues to work out—but that didn’t change the fact that he was the kind of backup brute force a prime alpha needed.

*If he hadn’t already been a general once...*

“You should come with us,” I said, standing up once more. The chair legs seemed ultra loud in the otherwise silent room as they scraped along the surface of the tiles.

A strange smile crossed Professor Blue’s face, but it was gone quickly enough. “I was already planning on accompanying you. After all, you will need a travel guide, and I do believe I am more than qualified for the position.”

That was most certainly true.

For all my confidence, I was still very much a fish out of water when it came to the minute details of this world and



shifter ceremony. I had no idea about the expectations that I would need to meet for this duel.

But Professor Blue most certainly did.

He would have to give me a crash course on everything Mikel on the way to the border meeting.

I left him to finish setting it up and stepped out into the hallway. I should have been nervous, but I was strangely at peace with the whole situation. Maybe because I knew it was unavoidable; it had to happen, and the outcome was probably already fate-picked.

But before I went, there was one thing that I wanted to do...



There was a chance that I wouldn't win.

I knew it.

I was proud of what I had learned. I was confident in my abilities as a fighter and a strategist. But that didn't change the fact that there would always be a chance this fight didn't end in my favor. And when that happened, when it all came crashing down around me, I had to be ready for it.

I had to make sure that there was nothing left undone behind me.

That was why I sought out the one other girl that had been on my mind.

Isa Silverbranch was tall and willowy, with small breasts and a pert ass. She wore the same uniform as the other women in the Academy, though the sleeves of her jacket were slightly too long, hanging down closer to her knuckles than her wrist. She looked perpetually nervous, even though she was just sitting at the base of a large oak tree near the edge of the forest that lined the campus grounds.

Bright blue feathers were mixed in with her silvery-black hair. More of them could be seen around her ears and her temples. Though the jacket sleeves were hiding them at present, I knew that there must have been more on her elbows. Some of the feathery plumage was visible on her neck, and when she shifted her head to the left, I saw that her sharp teeth pointed slightly inwards, like a beak's curve.

That was my girl.

That was *going* to be my girl.

When I dropped down onto the ground next to her, she jumped, shifted a little bit towards me, and then pulled back like she had to catch herself. That just reinforced the fact that she felt it too. A pull between us—something that was more than just physical attraction.

Though, let's be honest... that was there too. Isa was gorgeous.

It was the fact that even with all of this going on, even with the world about to shake apart, I could still feel an undeniable, pulling twist in my heart whenever the woman came to mind.

“Victor,” she said, sounding nervous, “am I in trouble for something?”

“No,” I told her with a laugh. “It's pretty much the total opposite.”

Her golden eyes flicked over me, something like interest sparking in them. “Lillin says that you claimed her.”

I perked up a little bit. “You know Lillin?”

She squeaked, and her gaze snapped down to the grass between us. “Sorry! She isn't, like, talking *about* you or anything. She just talks... a lot! Sorry!”

“You don't need to be so nervous.” I reached over and brushed the hair out of her face, the tips of my fingers brushing over the curve of her cheek. She leaned almost instantly into the touch, making a soft, pleased sound in the back of her throat.

“I'm sorry,” she said again. “Alphas just... make me nervous.”

I understood that. When I last saw Isa, she had been spending most of her time in an old shack out in the middle of the woods. Though she wasn't a delta herself, she spent most of her time with them—and they had been hiding out there to

avoid the accusing gazes of most alphas and betas attending the Academy.

I had only enacted a law that would undo their decades of persecution recently. In fact, right before Natasha pulled up onto the Academy grounds. Almost literally before it. Minutes. Not even a half-hour apart.

No one had time to try and process things. It was part of why the whole Academy seemed to be in such disarray. Everywhere you looked, shifters were trying to come to terms with something: Classes that had been put on hold until next semester because their teachers were *dead*, mentors that had gone missing, new laws that had been put into place.

I knew that changing the laws around deltas would wrinkle the whiskers of some of the older generation, but I also knew that it was going to be a change that made us more powerful as a house and a pack. It was one that I would become known for too.

The prime alpha that finally allowed deltas to take mates.

That was the legacy that I wanted looped to my name. The prime alpha that made changes to better his house. My father was... He was good, I supposed. People seemed to respect him, and they spoke highly of him in the way that you would speak highly of a former president. But there was something else there.

A note of fear and unease in their eyes. Rumors that he had been a cruel and harsh man. A thought in the back of my head: *Was that what drove my mother away from him and into Mikel's arms?* His harsh personality and eagerness to try and press things into place, to knock things down, to push them where he wanted them?

Big and brutish. That was what the gossip called him. And that wasn't what I wanted. My legacy wasn't going to be built on fear. It was going to be built on change, and it would be change for the better.

The deltas were ruled over by antiquated laws. Rules that had no bearing on our modern society. Their old purpose had

been ruled a crime, but their treatment hadn't changed. They were still at the bottom of the totem pole, still being pushed around, still being used as a punching bag. As something to stare at, leer at, hunt, and discard.

Their building had been burned down on Beaumont's command and had not been rebuilt until I demanded that it be a priority. It was a long-standing, slow-changing issue, and it had left the shifters on these Academy grounds *scared*. The deltas, at least.

And the omegas who were like Isa—more on the quiet side, not prone to fighting.

I reached out and pressed my hand gently to the side of her neck, then pulled it away. I made the look on my face as warm as I could manage, then told her, "Lillin can talk about whatever she wants. I'm actually glad that you two know each other. This makes things easier."

She squeaked again. "Make what easier?"

Wait. It wasn't a squeak. She was an avian shifter. It was a chirp! Okay, that was just, like, the absolute cutest thing I had ever heard. Did all avian shifters do that? Did she just do it more often than the others? I wasn't certain, but I knew that it was just the absolute best sound.

I couldn't help but wonder what other sounds she might make... but I swept the thought from my head. Some of my girls might have been happy to just jump straight into that, but I knew that Isa wasn't that sort. She was going to want someone to ease her along. She was going to want something solid between us.

I stood up and offered her my hand.

Isa took it after just a moment's pause, letting me help her up. She was shorter than I was by a good bit, but her eyes glinted up at me like they had been chipped straight out of the sun.

"I wanted to ask you on a date," I told her.

Isa's whole face went bright red. She flushed and shifted and looked down at her feet, totally nervous about the whole

thing. Then she glanced back up at me, chirping softly and speaking even softer than that. “A date?”

“A date. I can’t do it today, and I’m leaving tomorrow on prime business.” A pause. Most everyone would just get that short sum-up. The normal people here at the Academy didn’t need to know what that business was until it had been handled and dealt with.

But Isa wasn’t just a normal person, now, was she? With any luck, she would be one of my mates.

“But I didn’t want to leave with any unfinished business or regret any missed opportunities.”

Isa swore under her breath, hands flying up to cover her face. Even the backs of her knuckles were a bright, dusty red. “You want... me? Why?”

“You know why,” I told her. “We felt it the first time that we met.”

One of Isa’s hands dropped down to her chest, pressing against it. A dead giveaway that she knew what I was talking about. That she *did* feel it.

Instincts were powerful, especially once you learned how to recognize them. They could set the stage for something that you had never expected but knew that there would be no living without. They could let you see something that might otherwise be missed.

A smug smile on your senior alpha’s face. The ties that bound you to a prospective future mate.

From my studies, I knew that many primes skipped this process. They were meant to have five generals and five mates; that was what kept them balanced and allowed all their shifts to be fully accessible.

They found their mate and felt the tug, and they simply stated that it was to be. But my human half still craved that romantic interest. That added layer of humanity. It was an option, and not something that *had* to happen.

But the fact of the matter was that Isa felt it too. She felt the way that it pulled against us, twisting us closer, making our bodies connect in ways that our souls had not yet found. And it clicked, past our souls, on a level that was totally instinctual.

I reached out and brushed a hand over her cheek, then leaned down and gave her a chaste kiss. There was an urge inside of me to do more—to shove her against the tree and take her, right then and there—but I would not have a mate that was leery around me, and I would not have a mate that didn't enjoy my company.

“Then when I get back,” I told her, “we’re going on a date.”

She nodded at me, almost in awe of it, and watched as I turned and made my way not towards the main building but the library. I went straight to the third floor and settled in at one of the computers.

Thinking about the agreement that I had made with Fero, I pulled up *Azenar* for the first time in a long, long time.

>Log on?

The two words flashed over the computer screen. I leaned forward, bracing one hand on the narrow strip of desk between the chair and the keyboard, taking in the screen. *Log on* in big, gold script, fancy, overlaid on a night sky. The stars had been formed into the shape of Azenar's made-up constellations.

I typed in my details, trying not to think about how my whole world had changed once already—and how it was about to change again. The map finally loaded in, revealing my character. I was standing in a grassy green field, wearing my bloodied armor. There was a slew of PMs from people asking where I had gone, but the only one that held an interest for me was...

PENDRAGON

>Hey. We doing this?

SHADOWCLAW

>We're doing this. I'm warping there now.

PENDRAGON

>Already waiting.

I used a magical crystal given out to everyone who hit level fifty to warp to the fountain, and there was Pendragon's avatar. He was a lirkin, which I should have guessed at. The character was a form of lizard man with a long tail, sharp eyes, and a big red-and-purple crest flared up on the back of his head. He was a Dark Light Mage, which meant that he dual-wielded both sun and moon magic, making him a force to be reckoned with.

SHADOWCLAW

>The lirkin makes sense now.

PENDRAGON

>Don't think too hard on it. I just thought it was cool. On three?

SHADOWCLAW

>On three.

Stepping into the fountain, my character was surrounded with a white light as the goddess gave out her blessing. I could vaguely make out the blotted-out form of Fero's avatar beside my own, though the screen was so whited out, everything was sort of hazy.

When the light cleared, there was a solid four seconds of stillness. Then a text banner popped up above me.

*The goddess of the spring has seen greatness in you. She has requested that you give her aid. There is a mountain to the far north, and on the peak of that mountain, there is something that belongs to her. It was taken long ago, on the day that she was sealed in these crystalline waters. If you can bring it back to her, she will reward you with treasures like no other.*

*Accept?*

*Yes/No*

I clicked on *YES*, feeling a bit like I had just gotten a strong buzz. It rattled through me. I waited until Fero



messed me first.

PENDRAGON

>Just kiri. How about you?

A shudder ran through me. My throat bobbed when I swallowed. I stared at the screen, at the place where the text box had been—and a sense of peace and confidence washed over me. This was supposed to prove that I was going to have good luck on this trip, and that good luck had most certainly been proven. It was clinging to me, settled deep inside of me.

There were boundless reasons to ensure that I made it back after this trip, topmost being, of course, that I wanted to live... and beyond that, the encouragements were stacking up.

SHADOWCLAW

>I got the quest.

PENDRAGON

>No shit!!!! You got the quest???? V that's insane! I've literally never seen anyone -

>get the quest before! That's like unheard of!

SHADOWCLAW

>I guess you were right about getting proof of luck.

PENDRAGON

>Maybe this should be your new tradition then, huh? Maybe you should be working -

>at making sure you can get out here before every big fight. A bit of -

>Azenar style luck.

Stupid text limit. The PM system in *Azenar* was the one place that was lacking. You could only send so many words per message before you had to move onto the next line. It was meant to mimic old-school internet-era games like *Club Penguin*, where the text options were limited.

I knew that some of the players liked it for the serious nostalgia factor that it created, but it had always gotten on my

nerves. Nothing made me want to chew on my tongue more than a partial sentence coming through, the other person getting distracted, and then needing to wait fifteen minutes before the sentence was even finished.

SHADOWCLAW

>You might be onto something. Can't stay on here any longer though. I've -

>got to go and check on Monty. We're going to talk to Elijah.

PENDRAGON

>About?

>Is that my business? Sorry.

He spoke totally differently online than he did in person. It just furthered my belief that Fero's accent was from another country. Maybe he was second generation? Or it could have just been a shifter thing—something to do with being raised as a sheltered saurian? It was something that I would have to try and find out later.

Not now, though.

There were too many things getting pushed onto my “do this later” list, and there were too few things being crossed off the “do it now” list. I had to find a way to make this balance *better*.

For now, though, there were lines to establish, people to let in, people to convince. One day, and then I was gone.

Hopefully, not for good.

SHADOWCLAW

>You're my general. It's all your business.

PENDRAGON

>:)

SHADOWCLAW

>Elijah is a strong alpha. We're going to speak to him about -

>coming out with us to the challenge with Mikel.

PENDRAGON

>Smart idea. I won't keep you.

It only took a few more exchanges before I was getting out of the PMs. I didn't want my avatar to just be standing awkwardly in the fountain until I logged on next, considering how many players came out there every day, so I used my portals to fast-travel as close to the northern mountains as I could go.

As far as I was aware, there weren't any public bits of lore about the goddess in the fountain. It had never been established anywhere else in-game that she was trapped there either. I had always assumed that she was *just* a fountain goddess.

The allure of the digital mountains was strong. My fingers itched to take on the quest, but a quick check of my Quest Guide proved that it wasn't something that would run out of time. I had plenty of chances to get to this later... and plenty of things in the real world that needed to be handled now.

So, regretfully, I set my avatar into stasis mode, then logged fully out of the system. I didn't get up right away. The menu for *Azenar* was back on the screen.

>Log on?

The words were something that had always been there, but in that moment, they meant *more*. They were a solid thing. A reminder that I had *something* worth coming back to. That I had things that existed beyond the shifter society's need for a prime alpha. I was more than just my title. I was more than just what they were making me out to be.

And that was something I would never forget.

I would *not* become the same man that my father had turned into. No matter what.



True to what I told Fero, soon as I managed to haul my ass out of the library, I met up with Monty and went out in search of Elijah. The avian alpha was strong and smart, exactly what I needed to round out my team—but my previous approach to him hadn't been met with enough confidence in my abilities.

As we walked, Monty said, "I mean, there's nothing that could make someone have more faith in you than taking down Mikel. If this doesn't sway him, he's an idiot."

"Don't say that to his face," I told Monty with a huff of laughter.

"Just making a point. He is, though. You're the best prime we've had in this house since before I was born. No offense to your dad, but... you're better than he was."

A burst of pride ran down my spine at that. "How's that offensive? It's a compliment."

Monty laughed. "It's the truth; that's what it is. You've got a lot going for you."

"Think it will be enough to sway Elijah?"

"A better question"—Monty grinned—"is what you're going to do if it doesn't."

We followed his scent into the main alpha building, then took the stairs up towards the third floor, where his room was located. I told Monty, "I'm going to go out anyway. Hopefully, he'll come out and get an eyeful. And if not... I guess that I'll have to start looking for someone else to fill up that quota."

Maybe when the semester ends, I'll find someone outside of the Academy."

He frowned. "You don't sound like you want to do that."

"I don't," I said with a laugh. "I like Elijah. I like what he's capable of. I think that he would be a good addition to our forces. Our team."

"Is that what we are? A team?"

"Better than a crew, at any rate," I said, giving him the best shit-eating grin I could manage.

Monty just went red as he stared at me, trying to think of some reply before he eventually deflated with a long sigh. "You're really never going to let me live that down, are you?"

I chuckled. "Tell you what. I kill Mikel, and you'll never hear about it again."

He thumped me on the shoulder. "And if you don't... well, then you'll be dead, and I won't have to hear about it again regardless." He turned to me and flashed a cheeky grin. "So, silver linings at least."

It was all I could do not to burst out laughing as I snorted and shook my head. "Asshole."

Monty laughed. "You started it, man. Don't dish it if you can't take it."

I nodded. "Fair."

The two of us kept grinning as we made our way to Elijah's room. I thumped on the door, and it swung open almost immediately.

Elijah was dressed as though he was ready to go out somewhere. The strong scent of patchouli incense was bleeding out of his room, and he looked at me as though he had been expecting me.

"Victor," he said. He gave Monty a curt nod too. "Monty."

"Elijah, I'm planning on challenging Mikel," I said, telling him straight up. "We're leaving tonight. I wanted you to come with me. I know that you weren't ready to make the decision

on becoming a general before, but I want to show you that I *am* worthy of your loyalty.”

“It’s interesting,” said Elijah, “that you would make so much effort. Do you really think that I’m worth it?”

“Yes,” I said. “I think that you’re exactly the sort of shifter that I need by my side. And I’m willing to prove my strength to you.”

Elijah cocked his head to the side, and then the corner of his mouth twitched up just a little bit. “Luckily for you, that’s unnecessary. I think you proved to everyone on campus that you deserve to be the prime alpha after your fight with Natasha. You have already shown me exactly what your strength is worth.”

Was that a good thing?

God, here I was hoping that he wasn’t about to tell me that it wasn’t enough. I bit my tongue, hard, to prevent my old instincts from kicking in. Back when I’d been part of my law school’s debate team, a comment like that would have had me launching into a spiel about constant growth.

Which was true, of course.

But shifters didn’t put a whole lot of stock in words. They liked to solve their problems physically, and that meant that they wanted their leader to do the same.

I’d showed him where I was at. It was up to Elijah to decide if that was enough, if he thought that I could keep developing into the prime alpha that he wanted to see... and most importantly, if becoming a general was even something that he was interested in doing.

After all, you couldn’t just back out once you made that pact. It was bound by ancestors. It was bound by spirits, by magic, by words that had been spoken dozens of times over the centuries. I didn’t know if it was the same in every house, but at least for House Blackstone, being a general was not something that could be taken lightly.

“I would be honored to be your general,” said Elijah. “Come in.”

He waved us into the room. Monty pulled the door shut behind him.

It looked pretty much just like mine. There was a massive four-poster bed with an end table on either side of it. Heavy blue curtains, drawn shut, hung over the windows. Several photographs were sitting on top of the ancient-looking dark wood dresser; I assumed that they must have been of his family.

I took a step towards them. Mother and father, and then a younger avian shifter. Either a younger sister, or a lover that wasn't at the Academy. I turned back towards Elijah, keeping the questions to myself. There would always be a time for questions, but it was not now.

Monty stood at the door, shoulders braced against it and arms crossed over his chest. There was no way that anyone would be able to come through it with him standing there like that. His gaze was serious, as was mine.

Elijah slowly took a knee in front of me. This had been done four times already, and still, the shift that it created in the air was something that I would never get used to: The intensity of Elijah's gaze as it settled on me, the heavy notes that were twisted up in his voice when he said, "I swear to fulfill, to the best of my ability and judgment, this covenant: I will bear true faith and allegiance to the prime alpha, Victor."

His head bowed in submission, and his eyes settled on my feet. This was more than just an agreement of words. This was an oath. This was something that would bind him to me... forever.

To break this oath would be painful, both physically and mentally. It was something that few generals had ever dared to do.

"I will give to him my blood and my breath, and spill both onto the earth should that toil be requested. At his side, in his graces, I will command those given to me for protection, and I will provide the same to my alpha prime, in whatever manner is requested." There was no doubt that he meant each and every word. No doubt that he truly would provide it for me.

Anything and everything that I asked.

I could hear the voices of the other generals that had taken that oath. Though they were not indistinguishable from the others, I knew that Monty's voice was among them now, and that the voices of my other three generals were wrapping through the air.

And I knew this too: It wasn't just an oath that the general made. It was an oath that I was taking, and one that came with a great and heavy weight. "You who have sworn to me blood and breath, death and life—you have given to me what few others would give—in your hands, I place the avian and my back."

A shudder rippled through the world around us. There was a transfer of strength, a transfer of power. Elijah's strength became mine, and his eyes slipped shut as a sense of peace washed over him. When he stood up, several long seconds later, I repeated the ceremonial movements by clasping hold of his hand and elbow, and he returned the gesture. Our eyes met.

Elijah had nothing but respect for me.

"I'm glad to have you at my side," I told him earnestly. It wasn't tradition to keep talking, but the oath had been made and there were certain things I needed to say. "I know that you're the same as me. The same as the rest of us. We haven't even finished both semesters here at the Academy."

When I released my grip on Elijah's hand, he said, "That's true. We haven't."

"But I don't think that's going to stop us from winning," I said. "I've watched you fight. I've watched Monty and the others. We've sparred. We've been here for months. And I think the fact that we're younger and still working at adapting is going to be to our benefit. He's set in his ways."

"You really are confident about this," said Elijah lightly.

Monty said, "And he has every right to be. I've seen him in a fight. Real ones. If anyone can get our boundary line reasserted, it's going to be Victor."



Another surge of pride. To have so many people backing me... To have Monty's faith be this strong. Everyone needed an ego boost on occasion. And this one was mine.

Elijah softly put in, "You're still missing your avian form."

"I know. And that will put me at a disadvantage against him. He can fight back in all five shifts, and I only have four of them. But that just means he's going to rely more on the element of surprise than he is anything else. And I can use a more set-in-stone strategy. I'll turn my disadvantage into an advantage. It's the best choice we've got."

Elijah thought about it for a moment, then nodded. "I'll be ready."

"Good. We're glad to have you go out with us."

The rest of the day seemed to pass in a blur. And yet, it also seemed to drag out forever. I thought that there must have been something about it that seemed inelegant, waiting until dusk. But it was for a good reason. We had a lot of ground to travel, and we had to do it fast.

When dusk came, we gathered together at one of the back exits of the Academy. It was a large group: My five generals, my five girls, and Professor Blue.

He seemed a little uneasy at the amount of people we were bringing along, but he didn't outright say anything. There was that teetering balance between us; I was his student, but I was also the head of his entire house. And that meant that if I said the girls were coming, then the girls were coming.

"Alright," he said. "This way."

We left in a large silver van with the Apex Academy logo on the side of it. There was plenty of room for all of us. The vehicle trundled through the forest, down a dirt road, and headed for the highway.

Petra curled up against my side, one hand pressed to my chest. She rested her cheek against my shoulder, and I wrapped an arm about her middle, holding her steady even when the tires caught in the pits in the road.

Professor Blue drove. I was a little surprised by that, but... I figured that he didn't want to take the risk of bringing anyone else. He was very uneasy. I could tell that.

Monty could too. He kept looking up at his dad in the driver's seat, brows furrowed and a look of concern on his face. I kicked out, knocking my foot against the side of Monty's ankle. Our gaze met, and I asked a silent question of him.

He looked back at me, shoulders bouncing minutely. He didn't have any ideas either. Something was under Professor Blue's skin, and from the smell of it, it had to be more than just the fact that the girls were coming with us.

Was it doubt?

Did he not think I was ready to face Mikel down?

Well, if that was it, I was just going to need to prove him wrong. And I could too. I would make sure that he and everyone else knew that I wasn't going to just roll over because something wasn't easy or a little less straightforward than I would have liked.

And if something else was troubling the professor... we would deal with it when the time came. For now, the only thing that mattered was getting to the meeting.



We drove for hours on end until we reached the border. As we turned off, there was a large dirt road that we parked on. Professor Blue said, “We walk from here. A mile as people, then we can shift out and finish it up that way.”

“A mile in this form?” Fero made a face, then breathed out. “People.”

He shook his head, and I stifled a snort. We had to make sure that we didn’t shift where a human might be able to spot us. This stretch of the land was owned by a shifter family who had property on both sides of the Canadian-American border. It was a large expanse of pine forest.

Communities of shifters tended to do this. They would buy up big plots of land and then leave it overrun with wildlife so we had areas that were still our own, built for us to explore, to move through in our shifted form.

We had to walk a mile, just as Professor Blue said, but once we were deep enough into the wilderness, we could take on our shifts. I let my form change into that of my bear kin, the one that I was most comfortable in. At my side, Monty and Cass did the same, taking on bear kin forms.

Professor Blue was a behemoth when he shifted. His bear kin shape was covered in scars—thick injuries where the fur had been shorn away, deep enough that even our accelerated healing magic wasn’t able to bring it back.

There was a strange-looking mark on his back, over the place where his heart would have been sitting. The scar was

almost starburst-shaped, and I could see glimpses of it in the same spot on his chest when he rose onto his hind legs to look around, ensuring that we were still on the right path.

It was an odd-looking injury.

That had to have come from something like a spear, though I couldn't imagine any shifter would have used a traditional human weapon in a fight. I glanced over at Monty, but he had his nose to the ground, buried in a holly bush. He was snorting hard.

When he lifted his head up, he jerked it at me, and I stepped over to see what he had found. A scent, unfamiliar and faint. I shoved my muzzle into the bush and breathed so hard that it came out as snorts and rapid-fire huffing, struggling to get a good whiff of what was inside the sharp-pronged holly leaves.

That was... a bear kin shifter, I thought. My ears twitched. Could it have been the family that owned this property? I sniffed it again. It was so faint and old I couldn't place the tang of the smell. Monty seemed vaguely distressed, but ahead of us, Professor Blue grunted.

We had lagged behind.

Petra was standing in her lynx form, watching me. Her ears were pricked forward with curiosity. She was large—six foot, maybe a little more than that—with silver fur that was riddled with black. The maroon-wine birthmark on her hand showed up in her shift form as a large blot of almost purple fur on her left paw, still in the same shape.

She was gorgeous. And even though she didn't like fighting, that didn't mean she wasn't *mean* in a fight.

Lynx shifters were known to be the most vicious fighters. Razor-sharp claws and fangs made them devastating hunters. Often, they were more tactical than the lycans and bear kin, who were their closest rivals. They tended to think more about how they attacked, showing more restraint than many others. They were agile, fast, and lean.

A shifted lynx was able to use a type of magic called Shadow Stealth. That meant that they could meld into the darkness around them. While they could still be scented, all it took to avoid that was staying upwind. Petra didn't need to worry about getting caught.

Neither did Davis, who was several yards ahead and still walking, his steps fully padded and erased from hearing. The thick layer of pine needles that we were walking on didn't so much as crunch beneath the weight of his shadow stealth.

Remmy was right beside him in his fully shifted, absolutely haunting form.

I had a very imposing group. Fero and Elijah led the front of it, right there at the top of it all; their shifted forms were stark and impossible to miss, though honestly, my gaze kept drifting to Professor Blue, who walked between them.

The boundary line would be coming up soon. I was excited when we crossed it. In our shifted forms, we moved fast. Fast enough that the noonday sun was only starting to creep above us. There was more forest on the opposite side.

The air had changed.

I could taste the difference. It smelled like something else. Something closer to pure wilderness. I moved forward, each step longer than the last, until I was bounding up to walk side by side with Professor Blue.

That scent.

The one that Monty had found in the holly bush. It was back, stronger. It was on the ground that we were passing... but it was also in the air all around us. I realized with a start that it was Professor Blue I was smelling.

That was why Monty had seemed so distressed when he first found the odor! He had recognized it as his father, even when it was just a faint thing. And of course he did. Monty had grown up surrounded by Professor Blue's scent. I wouldn't have been surprised to learn he could parse it out even through a scent blocker.

The question was... what did Professor Blue have going on that would have brought him out here?

The scent trail at the holly bush had been old, left there for at least a week. It wasn't a recent trip, which only left me more confused. I remembered the way he'd shown his unhappiness about having to make this journey—about *me* making this journey.

The way that I was certain he had been keeping something from me.

I had brushed it off as more family secrets. Something else about the affair that my mother had had, perhaps. But maybe it was more than that.

I subtly glanced at the professor out of the corner of my eye. What could he be doing all the way out here?

I... I didn't know.

But I didn't like it.

And I didn't like the *possibilities* behind it either.

For now, though, all we could do was rely on the senior alpha to get us to the right spot—and hope that I was *wrong* about my bad feelings.



The location of our meeting point was gorgeous. It was pure wilderness. Snowcapped mountains cut through the distance, jutting out to interrupt the view of the late-evening sun. The light danced on the top of their white peaks, turning them into distant, glittering diamonds, and the smooth stones that curved through the rest of the valley looked enticing.

There was pine forest stretching out for as far as the eye could see, and I could hear a river running through the distance, even though I couldn't see it yet. Something stirred, fluttering about in the back of my chest. A calling to the wilds. Bear kin were meant to run free. To thrive in locations just like this one.

I could practically taste the way a fresh-caught salmon would taste from that river. I could feel my heart beating, urging me to abandon the present journey and race into the wilderness instead.

I didn't.

The human part of my brain was stronger, for the moment, than the animal instincts.

We kept going. The river came into view. It was a glittering thing, the sunlight casting jewels of white and yellow on its surface. It had a fast current, though it wasn't quite a whitewater rapid, and I could see the occasional flick of a trout through the churning tide.

A large wooden lodge stood before us.

It was massive, expensive, and clearly well-maintained. The wraparound front porch had three rocking chairs on it and a front door with a mountain-shaped hanger just beside it, several keys hooked into the loop. They were clearly meant to operate the three snowmobiles that were parked on the side of the lodge.

It wasn't the sort of thing that you would see out in New York—that was for sure. Two stories, and a bunch of glass windows with snow gathered on the ledges. There was snow on the ground too, though not much of it, and an undeniable chill in the air.

We fell back into our human forms one by one. The urge to go catch a fish reduced in intensity, but it didn't go away completely. I shuddered, exhaled, and twitched my ear, then wrinkled my nose. I needed to focus, but the long duration I had spent in my shifted form left me starving.

“Do we have time to eat?” Monty asked, rubbing his belly.

It was good to know that I wasn't alone. I sniffed the air hard. “I don't smell anyone, but that doesn't mean much. They might have blockers on them.”

“I'll check the lodge,” said Professor Blue.

Without thinking, I said, “Fero, go with him.”

Fero blinked at me in acceptance and followed an unhappy-looking Professor Blue up the steps and into the house.

The moment that he was out of sight, I reached out, curling fingers around Monty's wrist. “That was him in the bush, right?”

Monty shook his head, looking frustrated. “I've got no clue what he would be doing all the way out here.”

“Do you guys have family friends in the area? Some reason he might have been out this way?”

Monty shook his head a second time. “I don't—”

The sound of engines interrupted us. Several snowmobiles burst out of the trees, headed our way. My generals dropped



into fighting stances.

“Girls,” I barked, “onto the porch.”

Bree was the only girl that hesitated. Petra grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her up onto the lodge porch just as the front door opened. Fero was out first, though the professor was hot on his heels. They hit the snow-packed ground just as the snowmobiles came to a stop.

Several men got off of the vehicles, six of them in total. My gaze was locked on Mikel. This was the first time that I had seen him as a human. He was tall and broad through the shoulders, with a sharp jawline and hooded eyes. His short blond hair had been pushed backwards out of his face with copious amounts of gel, and he was wearing a very large, very expensive-looking jacket with a fur-lined ruff around the shoulders. The fur was tawny, almost as though it had come from a large number of rabbits.

He had a single scar on one cheek, though the line was faint.

“We finally meet in person,” said Mikel. “Victor, of House Blackstone. Allow me to dispense with the introductions.”

He gestured to the two men on his left.

“These are Raphael and Michonne,” said Mikel. They were two of his generals, one of them a lycan shifter and the other a dark-haired lynx. Neither of them looked happy to be there. They wore less expensive versions of the fur-lined jacket.

He gestured to the three men on his right.

“And these are Vlad, Ivan, and Daniel,” he said, sounding pleased. “My generals.”

I wasn't surprised by the obvious displays of wealth. Mikel was one of the richest people in the world and one of the most powerful too. It only made sense that he would show up like this, dressed to the nines and with his generals outfitted just the same, each of them wearing a thick golden ring that had the House Renoire crest on it. Even the snowmobiles were the newest model on the market.

I tilted my head back. For a moment, all I could think about was the last time we had met, when he had come at me in the shift of a lycan.

*The lycan loomed over me. He blocked out the sun—what bit of it was visible through the thick curls of smoke behind him. His shadow landed on me. I was in too much pain to hold the shift, and I dropped back into my human form. Blood ran down the curve of my face and hit my neck. It was hot. The smell of copper mixed with the acrid bitterness of the smoke.*

*The delta house was burning. It had been a ploy, a disguise to get him inside. It had been a trick. It was all a trick. There were so many people that I couldn't trust, and there was so much that I still had to learn. And in that moment, it seemed like I would never get the chance for it.*

*I looked up at him and struggled to twist my face into one of defiance. I couldn't talk. There was too much heat in my back. The side of my face was already swelling, the skin dark and lurid with bruising. Blood ran over my skin. The pain was so great that it had almost entirely faded away. It was like the only way that my body could think to deal with the pain was to just start trying to pretend that there was no pain; to just try and pretend that my eye wasn't half-gouged out of my face, that my skin wasn't rent asunder, that I wasn't lying there with so much copper clinging to my skin that it was enough to drown out the scent of the fire.*

*Mikel raised his paw—*

I blinked hard, having to force myself back into the present. My eye throbbed with a phantom pain, even though the Academy nurse had been able to totally heal it.

I chuckled. “You’d make a good lawyer. Technically, this is our first time meeting in *person*.” With a step forward, I motioned to my generals. “I’d introduce them, but we both know you’re well aware of who stand at my side.”

The corner of Mikel’s mouth twitched just a little. I couldn’t tell if he was irritated or amused by my brazen, dismissive tone. The only one that gave a grunt of disapproval

was the saurian shifter, Ivan. He seemed unhappy with the way I was speaking to his prime.

Tough shit.

His prime was lucky I wasn't just launching straight into a fight.

"Let's cut the formalities that neither of us give a shit about, shall we?" I said, slipping a hand into my pocket. The uniform of the Academy wasn't meant for this sort of weather, and a definite chill had settled over me. I ignored it. The heat of anger was starting to kindle in my chest. "We both know what we're here for."

He frowned, and the first genuine emotion I'd seen on him yet darkened his features. "Yes," he said, all but spitting the word. "I'm aware of my daughter's failures..." His jaw set in a hard line as he stared at me. "Truly, I didn't think she could possibly lose to you nor that you would dare go so far. To bind my daughter..." He let out an explosive breath. "You have far more of your father in you than I realized."

I shook my head. "Not nearly enough or we wouldn't be standing here now. If I was more like my father, your lifeless corpse would've long been shipped back to House Renoire."

My emotions were nearly overwhelming, and I had to rein them in... or I was going to launch myself at Mikel on principle alone.

Daniel's upper lip curled back. He growled at me in warning.

Davis snarled right back, and Monty snorted out through his nose so hard that I was surprised it didn't just force him straight into a shift.

I held my hand up at them to keep them back. Ultimately, this was between me and Mikel. And it was time for an ending to things.

"You need to understand something," I said. "This? Between us? It ends today." I took a breath and then looked him square in the eye. "Mikel Nazzarov, as prime alpha of

House Blackstone, I hereby challenge you to single combat. To the death.”

Mikel just stared at me, slight amusement behind the sheer amount of rage in his eyes. “You truly think you’re that strong?”

I gave him a fierce smile. “At the very least, I’m smarter than you. The play that you think will win you this day? I’m already one step ahead of you.”

He thought he was clever, but I was about to show him just how wrong he was. Mikel was all show and posture. It was the way he stood, the angle at which he held his head, the set of his gaze. He was trying to act like what he thought the prime alpha should act like.

I was just myself—and that was enough.

I was prime alpha by merely existing. I didn’t have to put on a performance to be who I was naturally meant to be.

Mikel, for having lived in this world ten times longer than I had, didn’t seem to understand that.

“But to answer your question,” I said, “I know I’m stronger than you.”

Mikel snarled. “Is that so?”

“At the very least, I don’t have to rely on smoke and mirrors to win my battles for me.” I turned and glanced behind me to Monty. “I mean, really, Monty, what does it say about a man that has to sneak-attack someone to gain the upper hand?”

Monty grinned, showing his teeth. “Says you’re a little bitch, in my opinion.”

I looked at Remmy. “And sending your daughter to fight in your stead?”

He stared past me to Mikel. “Coward.”

I had to fight to keep my face neutral as I turned to Cass and Petra. “And trying to take a mate by force?”

“Creep,” Petra said.

“Incel,” Cass replied with a smirk.

With a grin, I turned back to Mikel and held my arms out. “Well, there you have it. None of those are qualities befitting a prime alpha. And together, they paint a very clear picture.” I spat. “You’re pathetic, Mikel. A disgrace to your house, and you bring shame to every ideal a prime alpha is supposed to uphold.”

Ivan snarled again. He shifted, restless. His arms curled across his chest. Michonne moved to settle a hand on the man’s shoulder. I could sense the agitation coming off of them in waves. I could sense it coming off of Professor Blue too.

The senior alpha was standing at the base of the steps, either stopping the girls from coming down the stairs or stopping Mikel’s generals from going up them. I wasn’t entirely certain. It didn’t matter.

Mikel took a step forward, and my gaze snapped back to his face.

Every nerve in my body was alight.

Fero gave a low grumble of his own, a warning that Mikel shouldn’t come any closer.

I stared him down, unwavering, refusing to so much as blink.

I wasn’t going to back down.

“Big words,” he said, nodding to my pack. With a mocking tone, he commented, “Bigger entourage. You were so confident that you had to bring your entire retinue, did you?”

I shook my head. “Oh, no. They’re not here for you. They’re here for what comes after I win.”

Which was the truth. Or as close to the truth as I was willing to offer right now.

Mikel looked me up and down before nodding with a sigh. “Fine. I accept your challenge. To the death it is.”

This duel was going to be official, same as the fight with Natasha had been. And it was going to be hard. But I knew

that I could handle it.

I had to.

Once accepted, the generals formed a large circle around us. This fight was meant to be incredibly official. It was meant to show what could be done... and what had to be done.

Professor Blue was silent. This wasn't like the fight with Natasha. It was a traditional bout, but it was more than that. It was one final test. Even though he was silent, I could still hear what he had said at the start of my fight with Mikel's daughter.

The words rattled around inside of my head: *Today, we are here to see an ancient rite come to pass. A challenge has been made, and it has been met. We fight until one can no longer be part of the battle. There will be no interference.*

He didn't need to say it out loud. We all just knew that was the case. Not only could the lesser members of the pack, like my girls, not take part in this, but the generals couldn't either. The challenge was a one-on-one battle. There was no countdown. It was just known when the match would start.

Mikel shifted first, taking on the same lycan form with which he had nearly killed me in our last fight.

His fur was pitch black, and his claws were just as dark. They were massive things, like black knives. His tail wasn't just bushy; it was also so long that it dragged on the ground around him, and his fur was as heavy as a perpetual winter coat. The man's upper lip curled back. There was a flash of white teeth, and then of a dark gray, almost blue tongue.

And eyes. Pure blue, just like his daughter's. So striking they nearly froze me in place. They were about as inhuman as you could get—even more than the golden eyes that were so common among shifters. So blue it should have been white.

The lycan gave an amused huff, chuffing like a canine that found something particularly funny. He was old-blooded, ambitious, and charming in a sociopathic sort of way. I was certain that he was thinking about our last fight too. Especially when he'd lifted one hand and licked at his claws, as though swiping away blood.

I let my bear kin form take over, the familiar bulge of muscles pushing out through my body. With a roar, I made the first move. He ducked easily, swiping out with his claws. They pushed through my short, thick fur. I slammed into the hit, letting them split my skin on purpose in favor of lunging forward, snapping my jaws, and sinking fangs into the curve of his outstretched arms.

Sometimes, you had to take a hit to land a hit. Our accelerated healing meant that the moment his claws were free from my flesh, my body started to knit itself back together again. The sensation was one that I had long since grown used to and was exactly what allowed us to fight so viciously in our practice matches—though they were always under Professor Anders’s watching eyes.

There were plenty of watchful eyes here too, but none that would help me. I shook him, using my grip on his arm to fling him over my shoulder. Mikel twisted in midair and landed on all fours. He let out a howl, but I dropped into a mirroring shift—lycan to lycan—and his attack bounced off of me.

I charged again, long arms hanging at my sides. At the last minute, instead of striking out with my lycan claws, I flung myself into my saurian form and gave him a solid headbutt to the chest. It knocked the wind out of Mikel. He stumbled backwards and changed as well.

His saurian form was dark red and rusty, as though blood had long ago stained the scales in this new and ugly color. I snarled and hissed at him, but before I could spin around and strike him with my tail, an avian shifter knocked me aside and beat at me with his fangs.

I snarled and shifted back into my bear kin form, the sudden explosion of size knocking Ivan off me.

“He’s broken the tradition first,” snarled Monty, and the last word was barely out of his mouth before he changed and lunged into the fight.

I wasn’t surprised. A part of me had known that there was no way in hell a guy like Mikel would fight fairly. He threw himself forward, snarling, raging, and tackled Ivan to the

ground. All around me, a free-for-all broke out as the generals on both sides shifted and charged into the fray.

They were a snarling, writhing mess around me. I spun around, rising up onto my hind legs so I could tower over Mikel, who was once more back in his lycan form.

His daughter was a lycan too. That meant this must have been his first form, and thus the form in which he was most comfortable. I knew that I would be seeing a lot of that.

But it was almost a boon. I knew how to fight lycans, especially as a bear kin. I threw myself forward again, rearing up and slapping at him with one paw. He ducked beneath me, launching himself around to my back. Those claws of his caught in the sun and glittered as he surged past my side. They were deadly.

I had already felt their wrath. I wasn't keen on feeling it again... but I was too slow. In a move almost identical to the one that he'd used on me in our very first match, he rose onto his hind legs and flung himself forward, straight at my back. Claws dug into the flesh at the backs of my shoulders. It ripped my fur out in chunks, blood running in thick rivulets down the curve of my body and matting my short fur.

When he did this before, it had been the worst pain I'd ever been through. But I'd been in plenty of fights since then. I'd grown. Learned. Figured out how to shove some of that pain aside and use other bits of burning heat to my advantage.

I threw myself backwards, coming down on top of him. It forced his claws deeper into my flesh, but I could feel him grunting beneath me. I dropped into a more agile shift, my lynx form, so that I could twist around and sink my fangs into the side of his neck before he had a chance to get air back into his lungs.

This would be my greatest advantage.

He might have been a prime alpha for longer, but that just meant he already knew all his tricks and trademark moves. Me? I was still young, still learning. And even in just the short few months since we had last gone at each other, I had been



able to find new moves. I had watched my girls and my generals.

I had been taught by Professor Anders, and I had paid attention to the way that Natasha moved. I had seen Hannah in her lioness shift—a form that I doubted Mikel had ever had a chance to go up against—and though our bodies were not the same, I knew that some of her moves could easily be matched up with my lynx form.

I lurched sideways, paws slamming into his chest and stomach, and then twisted around until I was at his head. My fangs were still dug deep into him.

Mikel howled, and the sound was a piercing, cutting thing. He struck out, long arms allowing him to scrape at my neck. I shifted without losing my grip, becoming a bear kin once more. With the gift of strength that all bear kin possessed, I started to drag him away.

If I could get him into the nearby river, I could drown him.

But then a saurian slammed into me. Ivan again. Before he could so much as slap his tail against my chest, Remmy grabbed him in a chokehold. It was enough to get me away from Mikel, fortunately.

The other prime alpha lurched to his feet and shook himself off. His fur was damp with blood, but the wounds weren't deep enough to slow down his healing. He chuffed at me again. A canine laugh.

I snarled back at him. The prime thought he was all that and a basket of gold, but he hadn't even tried to take me out in a fair fight. He knew that he was getting on in years, and that without the help of his generals or the element of surprise, I actually stood a chance against him.

I rose onto all fours, towering above him, and let out a bear kin bellow. The sound echoed in the wilderness. An avian trilled, but I didn't stop to see who it was. All around me, the scent of sweat and blood had filled the air. The hum of anger and hatred and bloodlust. I felt it myself, dropping back onto all fours and shifting into the form of a lynx.

I flicked my ears, pinning them back against my head. My upper lips curled back to show off a mouth filled with fangs as I spat out a hiss and a snarl in his direction. I took a step towards him and watched as he changed form, taking on that of an avian. His wings had an emerald-green shimmer, and his eyes were still glinting with that icy blue.

He was taller and faster in this form, but I knew that his bones would be easier to snap. He came at me beating his wings, kicking up a torrent of wind. Sand and snow came up, blinding me. I turned my head away from him... and was met with a kick upside the jaw for my troubles.

His saurian general, Ivan, managed to grab me again, snapping my hind leg in his jaws and wrenching me backwards. I tried the same trick as before, changing into my larger bear kin shape, but he was ready for me. He kicked out, his raptor-like talon striking me across the chest and splitting my skin.

I grabbed him by the tail with one massive paw and spun him around, sending him flying straight into Mikel's charging form. There was the sound of bodies hitting wood, but before I could take another step towards Mikel or figure out what had caused the sound, Isa loosed a shrill scream.

My heart stopped, and my head snapped towards the lodge where she was supposed to be safe.

But she wasn't safe.

She was pinned to the ground and *screaming*.



*Shit, shit, shit!*

Professor Blue had changed into his bear shift and was growling down at her, one massive paw pinning Isa to the wooden deck by the neck. Petra had already been flung over the railings and out into the snow at the base. The other girls had backed up, not wanting this to turn into a straight-up bloodbath.

“What are you doing?” Cass demanded.

Monty dropped into his human form, backing away from the general whose ass he’d been kicking. The Russian lynx stepped backwards, taking a chance to nurse his wounds.

“Dad?” The word was croaked out like someone had just punched Monty in the stomach.

Professor Blue dropped back into his human form, then grabbed Isa by the hair and wrenched her up to her feet. One bulging arm wrapped around her middle and hefted her up. The other curled around her throat, pinning it still.

For a moment, it felt like the world was running in slow motion.

“Dad,” said Monty, taking a step towards him. The devastation was starting to turn into something else. Anger. “Put her *down*.”

I snarled.

Mikel dropped into his human form and gave a chuckle. “You did not think I would trust *Beaumont* to help me, did you?”

No. I hadn't.

I'd been expecting something from Professor Blue, but not so soon. I'd been expecting it at the very end of the fight, right when I was poised for the kill. Mikel's generals jumping in so soon had also thrown off my timeline.

Everything had devolved into chaos so quickly that I had to focus on pure survival.

Which had been Mikel's goal all along.

In that moment, I realized I'd underestimated just how much of a coward he truly was. I'd expected him to at least fight me fairly for as long as he could, only sending in his generals when it was clear he was losing.

That he'd done so almost from the outset was a move that I hadn't predicted.

And now I was paying for it.

My attention was torn. I didn't want to look away from Isa—she twisted, raking her nails over his wrist—but she was a weak fighter. I had seen her in both classes, as a human and a shifter. It was her lowest point. Give her a magical artifact, and she could knock you out in seconds. But without one?

Cass gave a warning growl and made to step forward, but Bree grabbed her by the wrist. “Don't. You don't know what he'll do to her.”

“Whatever I need to,” said Professor Blue firmly. “I've *always* done whatever I need to.”

“Yes,” said Mikel, the word almost a purr. “He has always been so very loyal. I would be mindful, Victor. A general who will turn on his own alpha, oh... I do not think he would hesitate to kill the girl.”

Monty let out a powerful roar and flung himself forward, straight at the balcony of the wraparound porch. The railing snapped beneath his weight. Isa managed to break free when

Professor Blue—no, Richmond; he was no professor of mine, not anymore—stumbled under the sudden weight.

It couldn't hold two shifted bear kin. The wood snapped. Bree grabbed Isa by the hand and helped her away. They darted around the side of the house.

With a bellow of pure rage, Monty surged at his father. Richmond batted him aside, but I could see that it took more effort than he wanted. The two bashed through another section of railing and hit the ground, still grappling with each other.

Monty was only a few inches shorter than his father. They were both massive things, rolling, snarling, biting at each other. I could practically feel the betrayal and the devastation coming off of Monty.

It worked. My attention had been shifted too much. In the form of a massive black bear, Mikel charged me and knocked me down. His weight bore down on me. I was still a human when the claws ripped over my chest, shredding my uniform and flaying the skin beneath it. I went with the first form that came to mind: a lycan.

The change wasn't enough to free me. I howled, letting it twist off into a scream. Mikel was pushed off me, but I only had enough time to get to my feet before he was coming at me with full force. He was switching more rapidly than I had ever seen someone change before. A bear kin one moment, a lycan the next.

I didn't realize that he was herding me somewhere until Petra screamed, "Victor, cliff!"

Then she screamed in pain as one of his generals grabbed her and threw her to the ground. Elijah was on the Russian in seconds, but I couldn't spare focus to even make sure that my girl was okay. I had to try and trust that my generals would keep them safe.

I had to trust that Monty would be okay.

As Mikel shifted into a human form, he couldn't seem to resist the urge to taunt me. "I did not think it would be so easy. Did you truly not know that Richmond was mine?"

“No, I figured it out. I just wasn’t expecting you to blow your ace in the hole so suddenly.” I snarled and writhed at him, trying to keep him talking while my body knitted itself together. The split in my clothing meant that my skin was chilled. “My fault for not knowing how much of a fucking coward you really are!”

I knew the cliff was less than ten feet behind me.

I had no clue what was at the bottom of it.

“Foolish child. You have no idea how this world truly works.” He sounded so smug. I wanted nothing more than to sink my claws into his stupid human face and rip it apart. The anger pulsed inside of me like a second heartbeat. It was almost enough to drown me. “Only further proof that you aren’t fit to be prime.”

Mikel laughed, and the sound was bitter and ugly. It might have been the cruelest sound that I had ever heard.

He took a step towards me, but I stayed still. I wouldn’t back up. I wouldn’t. Except... I then saw the sword that he’d pulled from his jacket. It was the length of my forearm. The blade had been carved with runes, all of which gave off a faint, pulsing light. It seemed to be in sync, somehow, with my own heartbeat.

“Do you like it?” Mikel asked, stopping and holding up the blade to be admired. “This belonged to your father. I had Richmond take it the day that he killed him.” A low laugh. “And to think, you took on a traitor’s son as your own general! I suppose that I should not be surprised. Your father never figured out that Richmond was involved. Not until it was too late.”

A pause.

Mikel tilted his head to the side. His smile was slow and silken... and terribly cruel. “Do you think that boy will pick you over his own flesh and blood? I am truly curious. In my house, family is everything.”

“Bullshit,” I spat. “Family is nothing but another word for tool to you.”

He shrugged. “Natasha is an excellent knife.”

“Was,” I said with a snarl. “She was.”

His face darkened. “Will be again when I sever your heart in two. You merely borrowed her. Killing you will restore everything to the way it is supposed to be.”

With that, Mikel jerked forward, swiping out with the blade. It wasn't close enough to hit me, but the runes on it pulsed and shot forth an enchanted crescent of light. It slammed into my chest, and though the energy didn't cut me, it knocked me backwards.

My feet went over the edge of the cliff. I grabbed onto it with one hand, the edges of the stones cutting into my palm. Blood and sweat made the grip hard to hold.

I was so terrified I couldn't even scream. My other arm pivoted, trying to get a grip. My fingers curled around the edge of the earth. The muscles in my arms started to bulge with effort as I struggled to pull myself up.

I was able to get partway up, the stones cutting hard into my chest, before Mikel leisurely stepped over to the edge of the stone. He looked down the bridge of his crooked nose at me, and those bright blue eyes of his shimmered with what I could only describe as pure and utter amusement.

“I do not think this worked out the way that you had been hoping,” Mikel said, gloating.

“How do you think”—I grunted, struggling to get higher—“that you're on top when you can't even kill me in a fair fight?”

“Simple,” he replied. “That is what you have yet to learn, Victor. The world isn't fair. Why should we fight as though it is?”

And then he brought his boot down on the side of my face with so much force that it sent my neck *snapping* backwards with a harsh crack of the joints, though any little snaps were quickly knitted back together. My jaw distended, knocked out of its socket with a flare of heat and pain.

The breath left me in a strangled shout. My hands scrabbled for purchase on the stone as I slid straight back down. One was so coated in sweat and blood and dirt that it just skidded; I couldn't get a grip with it. The other dug fingers in so hard that my claws started to splinter as they pressed down on the stone, catching my full weight.

One of them snapped clean off at the quick, blood pouring from a wound that throbbed like a stake to the heart. There was sweat dripping down the back of my neck, soaking my arms and shirt, and tears from the pain welled up in my eyes.

They were tears of rage and fury. I didn't want to die, but far more than that, I didn't want to leave my friends behind to suffer for their loyalty to me. Mikel would destroy all of them simply for that fact alone.

I wouldn't let that happen.

I couldn't.

Mikel stood over me, the smug assuredness of victory lurking in his gaze.

“Goodbye, Victor. Thank you for the additions to my house.”

As much as I might have wished otherwise, there was nothing I could do to stop him.

He brought his boot down on my hand—hard. The heel dug in, and my joints snapped. My claws snapped. There was blood, pain, heat, and an instant surge of swelling as all four digits gave at the knuckle where he had ground down his full body weight.

With a scream, I went over the cliff. Mikel didn't even care enough to stay and watch me.

The ground was gone. I had no idea what was beneath me. Air rushed up around me like a twister. I had never felt force like that before nor the way the stinging gales dug into my flesh. My healing ability surged to my hand and my jaw, straightening the bones back out and causing my broken claws to regrow at a rate so rapid it was nearly nauseating.



My head was spinning, spinning, and the world spun around me. All the while, the ground rushed up to meet me. All I could think was that this would be the end of me, and the end of House Blackstone. It would be the end of my generals. The end of my girls.

I could feel the ground. I could see it. Any second now, I would slam full force into the rocky plateau beneath me... and that would be it. That would be the end of it all. There would be no coming back from it.

And I just couldn't let that happen. I couldn't die here. I couldn't let *them* die here.

I refused.

A strange sensation curled up into my chest.

And my refusal joined that energy inside of me, uncurling like a snapping whip as my bones broke and reformed and twisted into a shape that they had never held before.

Milliseconds—that was how long it took. Not even a full beat of my racing, frantic heart, and then—

I wasn't falling anymore.

I was soaring.

The avian shift was like no form that I had ever been in. My bones were so light that they could catch the wind. Instinct took over, twisting my body at the last minute, mere feet above that stony ground, and throwing me back up. Powerful arms flapped and cut through the air. It wasn't a glide.

It was flight.

And while Mikel might have thought that he had just gotten rid of me... Fuck, if he wasn't wrong.

I was back.

And I was more goddamn pissed than ever.



The world was mine.

The air. The earth. There was nowhere I couldn't venture to. But there was also no time to be captivated by the allure of flight. My body was new and foreign to me—feathers, wings, and light, hollow bones—but it was one that instinct had me commanding without flaw or hesitation.

I soared up the side of the mountain cliff, my body at a sharp angle, the stones of the mountainside scraping over my belly and wings. The wind rushed over me, pushing my feathers back.

It cut into my skin, made me breathe out hard and heavy. Made me think that this... This was something everyone should experience.

And then I was bursting up into the air above it and going higher, up above the tops of the trees. My stop was clumsy, a little on the messy side, but I decided that it was good enough for the first time I had ever been in the air.

Beneath me, I could see that all hell had broken loose in my absence. Mikel's damned bear kin shifter had Cass by the neck and was trying to drag her backwards towards the snowmobiles. Lillin had a collar on—the sort that cut off your powers and made it impossible for you to shift. She had been handcuffed to one of the snowmobiles.

“Get my gifts, and let's go,” said Mikel from where he was standing as a human, still holding my dead father's blade. It was resting lightly against his thigh.

Fero screamed and threw himself forward, tackling the saurian shifter that had Petra backed into a corner. The two dropped into a fighting pose, but there was so much going on it was hard for my generals to keep up. Every time one of them made headway in a fight, one of the Russian generals made a go at the girls.

And we were down one.

Where was Monty?

I couldn't see him or Richmond. They might have just gone around the side of the house. They could have been trying to fight out near the edge of the nearby pine forest. Didn't matter.

It didn't.

I trusted Monty. Trusted him with my life and with the lives of my mates.

He was my first general. The day that he swore his oath to me, I had known that he was the kind of man that would die before he lost. He would die before being dishonored. He would die to keep me safe. Some people might have worried that being put up against his father would change that, but...

Monty wasn't just my general.

He was my best friend.

And I knew in my heart, in that space that ran deeper than animal instinct, that he would never betray me. I could only hope, instead, that he was strong enough to fight back and win against Richmond Blue.

And even beyond that, I didn't have time for hope. It was easy to see that Mikel was trying to collect the three girls that had been gifted to him: Cass and Petra by Beaumont, and Lillin by her own parents. He was going to take them, just to prove that he could.

My generals were trying. Their teeth snapped and their claws swiped. Davis bit down on Daniel's arm so hard that, even from up in the air, I could hear the bone crack and the

Russian general scream. He backed up, shaking his head and splitting skin.

Red droplets stained the ground. The healing factors all shifters bore meant that this was a long and hard fight; it was why many battles over something as serious as territory ended in death. It was just easier to kill your enemy than it was to make sure that they stayed down.

Sometimes, it was the *only* way to make sure they stayed down.

And even as I watched, the Russian lynx flung himself forward and sank his fangs into Fero's throat, knocking him away from the battle that he'd been in. The lynx bit down so hard that blood flowed freely from the wound, staining the ground below.

Fero was dragged away from the fight by his neck, hauled towards the river. He thrashed and twisted, but he couldn't manage to twist free. I could tell that he was struggling to keep his form. With a shriek of fury, I flung myself down, wings at my side for speed.

Though I had never fought in this form before, that didn't change the fact that I had instincts running through me like a cut live wire. Plus, I had seen plenty of avians fight at the Academy.

That was one of the biggest benefits to attending that place. It let me observe how shifters of all types fought.

Another shrill cry ripped itself from me.

The Russian lynx looked up, dropping Fero in the process. The wounds were deep enough that he didn't get up right away; he just lay there, limp, blood spilling onto the ground around him. It seemed to happen in slow motion, but the reality was that it only took seconds for me to twist my body around so that my heavily clawed feet slammed into the Russian lynx.

One clamped around the shifter's throat. The other, his shoulder. The force of our collision sent him sailing

backwards, and paired with a few flaps of my wings, I was able to push him straight into the river at his back.

Professor Balboa had once said, “*Avians have wide wings and are capable of both short flight and gliding. The hooked spurs on their wings can be deadly, and their beaks are for gouging. They can be very dangerous, but their more delicate bodies and hollow bones make them solely offensive shifters. Cautious and thoughtful, they tend to have one hundred percent control of their faculties when they shift.*”

Back then, I hadn't understood what all that meant. That you could be dangerous when you were so soft, that you could have more control of your faculties in one shift than in others. But now it made sense. I didn't have the cloud of anger that hung over my bear kin form nor the cloud of bloodlust that clung to my lycan form. There was no urge to hunt or to fuck.

It was just me... in a new body.

*Splash.* Under the water the Russian lynx went. I couldn't remember his name. I didn't want to. How dare this sorry son of a bitch try and kill my general!? How dare they think that they could take my mates?

“Victor,” Bree screamed, and then she let out a howl as she shifted again and threw herself towards Fero, bundling the man up in her long arms and carrying him from the river towards safety. The wounds on his throat were severe enough to result in very, very slow healing.

I dug my claws into the soft of the Russian lynx's neck so hard that the skin punctured and the water turned milky pink around him, the current swiftly carrying it away. The feathers on my legs were wet and clinging to my skin, but that didn't matter.

Panicked, the Russian lynx turned back into a human. I caught sight of wide green eyes as he thrashed. Human hands shoved at me.

It was no different than killing someone in shifter form.

It should have been, probably, but it wasn't.

It was just another casualty.

And it was *his own fault* for following someone like Mikel, for coming here and making such a play against me. The man stopped moving. As soon as his body was still, I curled my talons around his head and slammed it down on the stones of the riverbed as hard as I could, mustering as much force as possible.

*Crack.*

It wasn't just a few trickles of milky pink. It was pure red bubbling to the surface. The man was dead.

Even if he wasn't, and was just knocked out, he would be soon. A body could heal a cut. It couldn't heal the water that was going to be filling his lungs.

I twisted, spinning around and flinging myself out of the water while shifting into my bear kin form. This was no game. This was pure rage. How dare he take my girls, touch them, hurt them? Petra smelled like blood. Isa, like fear.

She shifted, though she wasn't a fighter, and pressed herself above Fero, trying to keep him safe as his body healed the grievous injury. I went for the next biggest target: the Russian bear kin. Big, shaggy black fur. Larger than I was, but not as big as Monty.

Where was Monty?

It didn't matter. There wasn't time to look for him. I thought that maybe I would *feel* if the connection with a general was severed through death. After all, we had both taken that oath. The loyalty went both ways.

"You should be dead!" Mikel snarled.

He slashed out with the enchanted blade. There was another pulse of light, but I was expecting it this time. I dropped into my much shorter lynx shift, never breaking stride. The crescent cut through the air above me and hit the back of the black-and-blue-feathered Russian shifter. He made a strangled shout.

I ignored it.

Ignored everything but the Russian bear kin.

With a snarl, I leaped onto his back, raking my claws over his shoulders and sinking my fangs into the side of his neck. I didn't bite and hold. I bit, released, and bit again. My goal was to cause so many injuries that his body had a hard time healing them quickly enough.

The bear kin grabbed me by the scruff and threw me overhead. I hit the ground, the wind knocked out of me. A big paw came down on my chest with bruising force. Elijah slammed into the Russian bear kin, forcing him back a few steps, and I let my body take on one of its most vicious forms.

The lycan took over, and the blood lust it called for gripped me tightly. My arms were longer, my speed doubled. I twisted around, striking out with my claws from a distance, darting in and back out. The Russian bear kin spun around and slapped at me, but he was too slow.

Elijah vanished. A moment later, Remmy was on the other side of the Russian bear kin. We tag-teamed him as a single unit, a pack of two lycans—which became a pack of three lycans once Bree joined us. We pushed forward, claws slicing through belly fat and thigh meat.

The Russian bear kin roared and managed to knock Remmy off his feet. He sank his teeth into my arm, but Bree was quick to slam both her claws into his back. The Russian bear kin bellowed and tried to back up, throwing himself towards the ground. As soon as he was down, the wind knocked out of Bree, I was on him.

I planted my feet in his chest, sharp toes digging in hard, and then ripped my claws across the meat of his throat. *Schlick*. The blood spurted out, spraying me in the face. I could see his eyes go wide. He gasped, blood spilling from the corners of his maw.

It bubbled up around my claws with each exhale, frothing between my digits. He dropped into his human form, much shorter and smaller than his bear kin shift. My feet were still planted on his chest. I twisted the claws hard, only pulling them out when the light had vanished from his eyes.

Two down. Three to go.

I stood up, still in my lycan form, and turned my gaze on a startled-looking Mikel. Just as he had laughed at me earlier, I chuffed at him now, tilting my head back and staring him down. I shook his general's blood from my claws, letting it spatter over the ground to make it clear I thought next to nothing of him.

Mikel snarled and took a step forward, but then he stopped. A look of undeniable smugness crossed his face.

“Victor,” Isa shouted, dropping back into her human shift just as Fero started to rouse again.

He groaned and pushed himself up on one elbow, the other pressing to his bruise-mottled throat. “Ugh. What happened?”

His voice was distorted. My head snapped towards them. I caught sight of Isa pointing... and then the scent of another bear kin shifter rose up. There was so much blood and sweat in the area it was hard to keep track of each shifter's individual odors.

But this one... This one was undeniably familiar.

Richmond Blue.





Richmond came charging from around the back of the house, still in his bear kin shift. He was absolutely massive, a hulking beast covered in scars. When he rose up onto his hind legs, he was three heads taller than my own bear kin shift.

There was blood on his muzzle.

It smelled like Monty.

A bolt of rage shot through me.

I dropped into my human form, just long enough to snap, “You’re going to die —not just for betraying me but my father as well. More than the coward Mikel, I will see you dead if it’s the last thing I do in this life.”

Richmond didn’t fall for the goading. He stayed a bear kin shifter. One ear twitched. His top lip curled back to show off his fangs.

Fine.

We would settle this the violent way. With a burst of heat and energy, I became a bear kin shifter. The form was almost comforting, even beneath all of that surging, racing anger.

I shifted, taking a step forward.

Richmond didn’t move.

The wind blew. I could hear Mikel chuckling behind me. My pupils went small, locking onto the man that I had called professor. Locking onto the man that I had been calling my teacher.

He was an old friend of the family by proxy, having been my father's general. Not just that, but supposedly, he had been the general that my father was closest with. Disgraced after my father's culling, he had moved to take on a teaching role at the Academy.

That was what everyone said. What everyone believed.

But now, the truth was out... and I knew better. There was no disgrace there. He had been planning for this the entire time. He'd culled my father on Mikel's order, and he'd made sure that he took me on as a mentor. Then he'd made sure that he got close to me, that he could give me helpful tips.

That I would never doubt him.

It was a stab through the heart, a betrayal that came with a certain amount of grief in the action. Trust could be so easily broken. What was wrong with this society? They preached in the classes about pack mates, house mates, having a sense of unity. But everywhere I turned, it seemed like the adults had forgotten that.

They were instead obsessed with power and stability. With finances. With always getting higher up the ladder. It was no different than the government system that the humans ran, and yet in each class that spoke about structure, the instructors had preached on and on about how the *shifters* were better. They were the top of the top, the cream of the crop.

They knew what could be done. They knew what had to be done. They took care of their own.

I hadn't seen that in the adults, though. How were they taking care of their own when they gave their kids away and turned on their families? They weren't. They were just using any means that they could find to justify their ugly, awful actions.

Bitterness built up in my chest. Monty might not have been dead—I could feel he was alive!—but that didn't change the fact that Richmond had *hurt* him. His son. My general. My best friend.

And he had turned on me, on his pack, on his house, on my mates!

He was going to pay.

I was going to kill him. I threw myself forward, and Richmond met me head-on. We grappled, our paws clasped together. He was bigger, but that didn't matter. Anger gave me a boost. Pure rage and fury curled through me in sharp shots of heat. Bear kin were the most violent among the shifts and tended to have the least amount of control. Their bodies were hardy, but that lack of control often put them in a bad spot. I wondered, very briefly, if that lack of control was what had spurred Richmond into acting today. But it didn't matter. Not really.

The only thing that mattered was the fact that I was going to win. I dropped down into a lycan shift and struck out with an uppercut. My long talons split open Richmond's chest, but the wounds healed back up in seconds.

He twisted his grip, grabbing me by the arm to flip me up and over one shoulder. *Crash!* I hit the ground so hard the earth busted beneath me. Burning pain filled my back. The air was knocked from my lungs.

A massive hind paw came down towards me, but I rolled out of the way at the last minute, dropping into my lynx form instead. I circled Richmond, who was breathing so hard that his nostrils were flaring.

The rest of the fighting had faded away completely. My focus was purely on Richmond. One step, two steps. I exhaled and charged. First, I darted forward, then feinted left and came at him from the right. I bounced into my avian shift at the last minute, which put me well above the height that he had swiped at.

I kicked out with both of my heavily clawed feet, battering him in the face. My wings kept me aloft, hovering for a moment. Richmond gave a scream of rage. He grabbed me by the long tail feathers and jerked me back towards the ground... but I was a prime.

That might have worked on a normal avian shift, but I wasn't just any old avian. I was the prime. I let my body act on instinct, changing into a lynx instead. Without any tail feathers he could hold onto, I was able to twist, land nimbly on my paws, and dart between his legs.

As soon as I was on the other side, I lurched upwards, literally scaling his back, then leaping off again before he could grab me. My flanks were heaving. My body was struggling to keep up. The constant shifting was pushing me to my limits, straining what I was able to do energy-wise. Each haggard exhale had my body shivering.

Richmond turned to me and let out a bellow—and then a rock hit him upside the head. It wasn't enough to hurt, but it got his attention. Both of our gazes snapped in the direction that the stone had come from.

Monty Blue had just stumbled around the side of the house. He was in his human form, and his body was mottled with bruises. There were bloodstains on his skin, though all the surface wounds had managed to heal.

I made a pleased yowl in his direction, lynx ears flicking forward.

Monty! I knew that he was okay! I knew it!

Monty had a second stone in his hand. He tossed it a few times, letting it thump heavily against the curve of his palm.

“We aren't finished yet,” Monty said.

Richmond was silent. He stared at his son, looking almost betrayed.

“If you think that I'm going to turn belly up just because *you've* gone rogue, then maybe you weren't paying enough attention while you raised me!” snarled Monty. “I'm not going to just... stay back and let you kill them. I won't do it!”

Richmond dropped onto all fours and stretched his neck out. It was a warning gesture, and I was certain that it was the only one Monty was going to get.

“I can deal with him,” I said, my breath finally coming back to me. Most of the bruising was healed away, and the pain in my spine was far less severe.

I couldn't imagine what this must have been like for Monty. Going head-to-head with the man that had raised him—the man that had taught him loyalty came before life. The man who had sheltered him, loved him, molded him into the perfect little general that he had become.

All of it was crashing down, and there wasn't even enough time to try and parse through it.

But Monty stayed strong. There was grief in his eyes, but it was simmering beneath a heavy veil of untold anger and rage. There was something deeper too. A sort of grieving that came about on an instinctual, energy-based level.

Monty shook his head. “Don't. My dad... He's already dead.”

Richmond growled.

“This is just some piece of trash that Mikel managed to lure in with a juicy piece of meat.” Monty spat on the ground, aiming towards his father's paws. “I'll handle things here. You go finish things with Mikel.”

I hesitated.

It wasn't doubt regarding Monty's strength. It was just concern. In fights like this, death was the only option. And I wasn't sure if Monty would be able to kill his father... nor whether I should even ask that of him.

But after a moment of looking Monty in the eyes, I could tell that it wasn't something I needed to fret over.

Monty had said it himself, after all.

The man that had raised him was dead. Richmond Blue had died the day that he turned on my father, culling the man that he had taken a sworn oath to protect. He had died before Monty was even born. He had been a shell, a mimic, an alter, reciting things that he no longer believed in, spouting speeches that maybe he *never* believed in.

The man that Monty called his father was gone, gone, gone away and might never have been there to begin with. So this fight wasn't against his parent, the Richmond Blue that had held his hand when he was young, read him stories, taught him to be a good man and a better soldier.

It was against the beast within the skin of lamb. The wolf that had been hiding deep within sheep's clothing. It was against someone that the world would be better off without and for a cause that Monty still believed in.

Richmond might have betrayed his prime alpha, his house, and his family, but Monty would not.

Because Richmond was not Monty's family.

I was.

So I nodded at him, just once, and then turned and gave my attention to the threat that really mattered.

Elijah and Davis had one of the Russian generals backed into a corner. I could see them in my peripheral vision. Mikel still held the enchanted blade, but he would have to make a call. Was he going to rely on that weapon just to possibly get the chance of culling me with my dead father's blade? Or was he going to fight me as a shifter, in a way that might actually give him a chance?

Someone yowled. I didn't look. My gaze was locked onto Mikel's in a silent challenge.

Monty and Richmond charged each other, meeting in the middle as shifters, grappling behind me. I didn't move. My gaze was *still* locked onto Mikel's.

Finally, the man made his decision.

He threw the blade aside and stepped to meet me—not as a coward of a man with a stolen weapon, but as a prime alpha, ready for the final fight.



I met him head-on. We crossed the battlefield as humans, staring each other down. Neither one wanted to be the first to shift; we knew that was going to be the end of it all. That the moment someone turned, this final fight would begin, and when it began... there would only be one more ending.

No more second chances. No more risks taken. No hoping that I snapped my neck when I hit the ground. No taking a chance that I might die, but might not. This would be something that ended bloody, or it would have no end at all.

He changed first, dropping into a Russian lynx shape and darting forward. He weaved right, feinted left, and then came at me from the right again. I barely had the time to change into a saurian shift before the blow hit me, a massive paw swiping over the side of my scaly form.

I used the momentum of the blow to my advantage, spinning around and swiping out with my tail. It caught him under the legs, tripping him up. As Mikel went down, I kicked out with one of my hind legs, and my raptor claw scraped and raked over the side of his face. Blood spilled.

There was a surge of pride. He might have gotten the first hit in, but I'd drawn first blood. I had killed two of his men when all of mine remained. The pride was short-lived, however, as he twisted into his bear kin shape and came down on top of me, easily knocking me aside. I hit the ground rolling and came back up on all fours as a lynx myself, but I

changed into an avian mid-charge so that I could soar up and over his head.

I hit the ground as a lycan and sank my claws deep into his left side, wrapping the right arm around Mikel's neck. He staggered sideways and roared, then started reaching over his shoulder and scrabbling for me.

Massive, thick black bear claws raked over the back of my neck and my shoulders. The thick ruff of my lycan form helped protect me some. I bit and bit and bit, sinking my teeth in as often as I could, using the same method that I had been planning to enact against Richmond.

The more injuries he had, the harder it would be for his body to heal them quickly. I ripped my left hand free of his side and threw it around his thick neck, plunging my claws into the curve of his chest... but then, suddenly, I wasn't clinging to a bear kin but to the back of another lycan. The change in shape and size threw me off.

My balance shifted, and he was able to shrug free of my grip, darting away and hunkering into a low half-crouch. We circled each other, our claws scraping and clacking against the ground. It was an ingrained lycan instinct, a warning that was as innate to me as growling when I was a lynx.

It seemed that even Mikel had the same instinct. We had strayed further from the group than I had planned. It didn't matter. We had to focus solely on each other. I was putting trust in my mates that they were strong, and even more trust in my generals that they could protect my girls.

They would die before they let something happen to one of them.

A low snarl built up in my throat. It twisted into a threatening howl that Mikel met in kind. He loved this form, I could tell. The lycan was his comfort, and it was his default. Though he shifted when he needed to, it was always *this* shift that he came back to.

His first shift.

I understood. Really, I did.



The first shift was the most comfortable. It was the one that gave me the most confidence. And in his aging years, Mikel had grown to rely on that confidence and comfort. He had stopped pushing himself to perfect the other shifts, instead opting to simply find a way to use the lycan to its full potential.

That was where we differed.

The moment that I obtained a new shift, I started to study it. I watched how others at the Academy fought using it. I brought in people who'd known that form since birth and allowed them to show me.

Mikel thought that he was the best. That there was no more room for improvement. And I knew that the minute you stopped trying to better yourself, you opened the gateways for other people to be *better* than you.

In my classes for law school, the professors had put a huge amount of stress on the fact that life was fluid. It was always moving, always changing, and our world was always developing. As new technology came into existence, people would act in different ways. That meant new laws would be created, because new crimes would be created—and because old crimes would be updated to match the modern era.

Door-to-door salesmen scams had been replaced with credit and debt removal scams; with internet Romeos that tricked desperate housewives out of their life savings; with drones that could follow you from great distances and spy on you no matter where you went.

That meant that those who dealt with the law had to be fluid too. Constantly changing, constantly studying, and always looking to stay not just up to date with those modern changes, but slightly ahead of the curve.

Simply put, the lawyer that always kept learning was going to be the one that solved the most cases and won the most sessions. And if you applied that to any aspect of life, I'd found, it made ample amounts of sense.

In terms of shifter society, it meant that the prime alpha who knew there was always a new trick to be learned about their five phenotypes would always be getting stronger. Meanwhile, the prime alpha that believed they had mastered their shifts thirty years ago would never stay top dog. New twists on old moves were always being taught, and there would always be room to improve on your secondary shifts.

And I had spent my whole short time as a shifter trying to improve. So when he came at me as a lycan, I let him. I fought him as an avian, but I kicked out with my clawed talons the way that I would have as a saurian shifter.

When he grabbed me by the feathers, I dropped out of his grip by changing into a lynx, then rose up onto my hind paws and boxed him as though I were a bear. For each move that he made, I had one to counter. A new one, a smart one. We circled each other; each round taking us further and further away from the rest of the fight.

Monty screamed, but Richmond screamed louder. I could smell blood and sweat. Some of it was my own. Some of it was Mikel's.

My foot kicked at the sword, and I took advantage of the fact that Mikel had dropped it. I slammed into my human shift, catching it with the toe of my boot and kicking it up into the air.

His eyes flashed with fury as he charged, swiping out at my soft human body with one razor-tipped lycan claw... but I grabbed the sword and slashed out faster. The blast of light slammed into Mikel and sent him rolling.

But I wasn't going to stop and gloat the way he did. He thought that I was just a kid, that I wasn't worth his time. I knew that he was a threat.

I was going to treat him like one. I was going to fight him like one. And at the end of the day, I was going to kill him like one.

*Slash.* Bright light cut through the air.

*Slash.* It left stains in my vision and pushed him backwards.

*Slash.* Every time that Mikel got up on his hind paws, he was pushed back down, stumbling, staggering. The light didn't hurt him, but it was like trying to fight back against a tidal wave. It pushed him further and further from the lodge, straight towards the very cliff that he had thrown me off of.

When Mikel realized what I had done, he dropped into his human form. "Is that really your master plan? You think that you can have the irony of killing me in this manner?"

He laughed.

"Boy, you are not the only one that can fly," Mikel goaded. "If I had known you'd unlocked your avian shift already, I'd have simply killed you before I threw you over the edge."

"That's your own fault, then, isn't it?" I said. "Just further proof that you're a pompous, dithering old fool. You know, I think Natasha would make a better prime alpha than you. At least she's got the guts to stick true to her word."

Mikel laughed. "She's too soft for a prime. You are too soft." He leaned forward slightly when he said it, as though it was meant to be some kind of gutting jab. "You have always been too soft."

"Is that really what you think? Because last time I checked the count, I've killed three of your men. And even if you don't want to count Beaumont—God knows I wouldn't want to admit to counting that bastard for anything—that doesn't change the fact that I've taken the life of two of your generals."

"And it eats at you. Does it not? It always eats the humans. The soft ones." Mikel snorted. He still acted like he was the one with the upper hand here, as though he had any semblance of control.

Guess the joke would be on him, then.

I snorted right back. "Honestly? Not even a little bit. I think at some point, people probably deserve what's coming to them. That's why we've got the electric chair, right? Because

sometimes people fuck up so much there's just no way for them to come back from it.”

I took a step forward, tapping the blade of the enchanted dagger against the outside of my thigh. It felt familiar, though I had never touched it before. What had my father used this for? Display? Had he always carried it with him? Had it been part of his prized collection, something that he'd honored? Something that he'd wanted to pass down to me but had never gotten the chance?

Was there any way to get an answer to these questions?

I had thought, originally, that I might be able to bulldoze the truth out of Richmond. But that wouldn't be the case. Who did that leave? My Uncle Aaron, sure, but he didn't seem like the talking sort. He seemed like the sort that had been alive for too long and was just going through the motions.

Lost too much, lived too little.

Maybe these questions would just never get answered. Maybe I would always find myself struggling to come to terms with the fact that people were missing in my life. That there would never be an explanation for certain things.

My mother was dead. My father was dead. Richmond and Mikel were the only two remaining people that truly understood what had been going on between my parents—and by the end of today, they would be dead too.

And the day was ending swiftly, both figuratively and literally.

Beyond Mikel's form, the sun was starting to set, turning the sky brilliant shades of orange, red, and purple. When it hit nightfall, the fighting would be done.

That was a promise that I was making, both to myself and to everyone that was fighting on my behalf.

“You might make fun of me, but you're the one that's backed to the edge of the cliff. And you're the one who lost their sword.” I pointed it at him as though I was going to plunge it into his chest.

And I was.

But only in a manner I knew that he could never, ever recover from.

One last hit to end it all. That was how this had to go, right?

Mikel smirked at me. “Go on, then. If you are so confident, little boy, stop with the talking.” He flung his arms out to the sides, mocking me. The sunlight cast him in a strange light. Dusk was falling, and it was falling fast. His front, nothing but shadow, backlit by the setting sun. “Finish this!”

Finish things.

Same as Monty had told me.

We all had to finish things: The end of our family lines. The end of our family lies. His father, and the last man alive that could have told me what had happened with my mother. The only people who held the answers.

Finish things.

They were going, going, going. And we were going to be the ones who sent them on their way. A final fight. A final *proof* that we were the new generation—the ones who would enact changes. We could be what they never were.

Loyal and brave and strong. Ready to bring shifter society back into the shining-gem state that it had been during the history books, before all these senior alphas came and fucked it up for everyone. Before parents had sold off their kids for a shiny new car. Before generals had turned on their primes.

We would live in a society where Monty and Coriander could be together, no matter their status. I would make sure of it.

Tears had formed in the corners of my eyes. Frustrated, exhausted, angry tears. But not sad ones. And not tears of defeat. I took a step forward, and then another. The distance between myself and Mikel was closing fast.

Mikel seemed confused by that. “What are you doing?”

He dropped into a lycan shift, sinking at the knees into a half-crouch. He snarled at me, showing all of his teeth, with his ears pinned back flat and his ruff puffed up like a scared kitty cat.

I didn't stop walking. I didn't drop the sword. I didn't change into another form.

“You think so poorly of me because I was raised with humans,” I said. “You think that because I've only just started to learn about shifters, I'm less than you. But I have something to prove you wrong. You're about to die, Mikel. And it's not a *shifter* that's going to kill you.”

All this time, I had been fighting. Not just with others but with myself. I had been fighting to find the balance between my two lives. Law school and the Apex Academy. My role as prime, and my top ranking on the leaderboards. Shifter standards and my human morals.

But I had finally, *finally* seen the overlap. It wasn't a balance. It wasn't one thing or the other. It was a merging of two lives. It was Fero and I playing the MMORPG together. It was knowing that deltas should have their own standing but also understanding that, sometimes, people had to die. It was coming to terms with bloody violence and also knowing that people like Hannah needed a kind hand extended to them.

Taking all of the things that I had been taught by the people in both halves of my life and rolling them together like a little clay ball.

So it wasn't a shifter that charged forward; it was a human.

I screamed, and the sound came from somewhere inside of me that was so primal it almost hurt. As though everything that I had ever wanted—along with every hurt, every ounce of misery, fear, or uncertainty—was being pushed out through the sound. It curled around me, surging, pushing out further and further into the air, into existence. And when I screamed, I saw it.

For the first time in either of our encounters, I saw *fear* in Mikel's eyes. But it was too late; he couldn't use that fear to

stop me. He couldn't do anything to stop me.

I slammed the blade of the enchanted knife into his shoulder, and we went over the ridge of the cliff together.

Mikel's fingers curled into my shirt, pulling me forward, and we hit freefall at the same time, slamming into the nothing below. The air curled up around us, crashing and resounding, cutting and pushing, digging at our skin.

Mikel spat out a slew of Russian I didn't recognize or understand, then snarled. His hands clawed at me, ripping at my face. I screamed and dug the knife in harder.

Mikel all but howled the words in Russian, throwing his head about and screaming. We twisted in the air, our bodies coming apart.

I hooked my fingers into his shirt and pulled myself close to him again.

He wanted to fight in the form of a lycan, the form that he was most comfortable in. I would let that be the form that killed him.

I shifted, and the lycan roared within me. I let it give in to its demands. I sank my teeth into Mikel's neck and ripped out his throat.

There was no strangled, cut-off scream. There was no dying oath. There was simply his blood spraying in the air around us, coating my fur, my face. There was simply this moment in time, he and I, copper and red and red and copper, and all I could see, and hear, and smell, and taste was his dying moment.

It was as sweet as anything I've ever had.

I pushed off of him and let my avian form take over, the wind catching under my wings just in time for the final drop. Mikel's body hit the ground with a heavy, solid thump. His body smashed on impact, the force of the fall enough to shatter the stone beneath him.

The wind kept me in the air. I was still enamored with the feeling of flight; I couldn't wait for the moment where I would

be able to take off and truly just enjoy the sensation of being in the air. For now, it came second to the fact that Mikel was on the ground, dead and gone.

Second to the fact that, after all of this, it was finally over.

Over.

And I had won.

Even in my avian form, his blood clung to my feathers. I stayed there, hovering in the air for a long moment, simply staring down at the mess beneath me.

Staring. Watching. My eyes blinked shut. My breathing steadied. I exhaled, and then I exhaled a second time.

Carefully, I landed on the ground. Without the instinct of a fight driving me onward, the avian form felt less steady. I walked over to the man and dropped into my human form. The air shifted. We were on the rocky shoals at the edge of a large lake. In the distance, the river crashed down over the edge and into a waterfall.

The setting sun cast the water in shades of red, spilling blood down into a stained lake. The air was still, the mountainous cliffs rising up to prevent the full buffeting force of the wind from hitting us. I took a step forward, then another.

Mikel didn't move.

He looked dead to me. Smelled it too. But I wasn't going to take any chances. Not with another prime alpha. I wasn't going to let this come back to bite me in the ass. I mean, look what happened to him, right?

I braced one booted foot on his chest and grabbed the handle of the enchanted blade, which was still shoved deep into his shoulder. With a grunt, I wrenched it out of him. There wasn't so much as a twitch of his muscles.

Crimson dripped from the curve of steel. *Plink, plink*. It fell into the rapidly spreading puddle around us. I dropped down on one knee and used my free hand to rip open the front of his shirt. There was a sort of irony in the fact that Richmond was the one that had taught me so much about anatomy.



Without that traitorous bastard, I never would have been able to locate the heart. I would have gotten, like, the lungs or the sternum or a stretch of fleshy muscle.

But hey, Richmond was a good teacher. He was thorough. He held some kind of respect for his job, if nothing else. And that meant I was able to press the tip of the blade to the flesh directly over Mikel's heart.

Still nothing.

No motion from him at all.

He was dead. *Dead*. But I had to make sure.

I put the base of my left palm against the hilt of the enchanted blade, then shoved down with all of my might. The sharpened steel pierced his flesh with ease. Even more blood spilled onto the ground.

There was a catch, but I used the strength of my bear kin shift to push it all the way through. And then I left him there like that.

I stepped backwards, finally content with the fact that Mikel was well and truly dead.

Then I turned and stepped towards the cliff. My own body ached and throbbed in every way. The healing sensation was working overtime, and having shifted so much after such a long hike... Yeah, my exhaustion levels were way up in the red-alert zone. But I wasn't done. Not yet.

I still had work to do. I still had to go a little further, do a little bit more.

My body shifted into its saurian form. I latched onto the side of the cliff and climbed up it, scaling the stone with ease. It was almost comforting, having something solid beneath my hands and feet after such a long drop towards the ground.

I pulled myself up onto solid ground and took just a moment to catch my breath.

Then I shook myself off and dropped into the form of a lynx. We were far enough away from the lodge that I couldn't make out what was going on. The twilight hour had fully

fallen, and with it came a raging windstorm. It was impossible to even hear what was happening up there, let alone do something about it.

So I steeled myself for any form of disaster, shook off my fur, and ran... towards the fight.

Not away from it.



The sight that met me when I got back to the lodge was somehow both the gnarliest thing I've ever laid eyes on... and the best. The generals were dead. They just... were.

The one I had drowned had long since been washed away, and the one that I had killed was still lying there in the dirt, the other three scattered around him. One was so bloodied and broken it looked like it had become a chew toy for several of my generals.

It was Isa who saw me first. She let out a shrill sound, then threw herself towards me. The collars had been removed from all my girls, which was a relief. Even more so was the way it felt to have Isa pressed up against me.

She made a soft sound in the back of her throat and whined and whimpered. I wrapped my arms around her.

"Is everyone okay?" I asked.

"Mostly," Fero said. "Nothing that won't heal."

The bruising on his throat had faded away, but there were healing wounds on the curve of his upper arm. He was sitting on the ground at the base of the steps that led up to the lodge. He had one arm flung backwards over the curve of the wood.

Elijah was trying to clean blood off his hands in the shallows of the river. "We're finished here. Where's Mikel?"

"Dead." I looked over the carnage and was pleased when Petra untangled herself from the heap of shifted ladies that

she'd been lying in. She came over to me as a lynx and pressed up against me, rubbing over the side of my hip.

I ran a hand over the square of her head, fingers soft against her fur, and looked around. The other girls were fine, though they appeared to be either too tired or too distressed to leave the heap that they had formed. That was fine, because there was something else I had to handle.

Monty, sitting on the ground beside the form of his fallen father.

I gave a low, questioning whine in my throat. Petra answered in turn.

Isa explained, "He hasn't said anything since the fighting stopped. Lillin and Bree both tried to talk to him, but... he didn't want to hear anything they had to say."

I nodded. "I'll handle it."

I pressed one small kiss to the side of her face and then stepped away from her, heading over to where Monty was still sitting. He rose to his feet when I stepped towards him, and the first thing out of his mouth was, "I'm sorry."

I froze up like my veins had just turned to stone. I wasn't sure what to expect.

"I should have known," said Monty, breaking me from the exhaustion-induced thought spiral that I was falling into.

I unfroze.

"You wouldn't have been able to tell," I said, stepping forward and placing my hand on his shoulder.

As much as Mikel's death had been a victory, and as much as I was glad it had happened... there would be grief there, too, eventually. There would always be that added weight, because taking a life—well, giving a shit about doing so—is what made me different from people like Beaumont.

So we felt it.

We would always feel it.

And Monty was feeling it a hell of a lot harder. The people we'd taken out had deserved it... but that was still his dad. And it was still a life we had taken.

So I shifted my grip, sliding it around to press against the space at the base of his neck instead. I had to stretch up to do it, pulling him forward and up against my front. He collapsed against me. For a moment, we weren't the prime and the first general.

We were just two friends, trying to deal with a really shitty hand together.

Monty didn't cry, but he sagged against me. He was a big guy. I had to lock my knees and lean hard into it, pressing against his chest. His chin dug into my shoulder. He didn't grip my back. I thought that maybe he didn't have it in him.

No one spoke to us. No one stared. They pointedly looked away. It was the closest thing to a moment of silence and privacy that we were going to get. When he pulled back, his eyes were red, swollen, and faintly glossy. He sniffed and scrubbed at his face hard, then looked at me with this heavy expression.

It was wet and sunken-in and so fucking tired that it made something inside of my own chest pinch up and hurt. I looked at him, then said, "This isn't on you."

"Victor—" he started.

I shook my head. "No. This isn't on you, Monty. What the fuck were you going to do, question your dad? That would have been stupid."

"I didn't... I didn't know."

"I don't doubt that," I said, my voice steady. "You don't need to prove it to me. I know you, and I trust you."

Monty made a low, animal keen in the back of his throat.

Remmy said, "I hate to interrupt, but it's dark. We should get inside. There's no clue what's going to happen once the sun goes down, and I don't know about you lot, but I don't feel like being dragged off into the dark."

Elijah asked, “What do we do about *this* lot?”

“Let them get dragged off into the dark,” said Remmy. Then he glanced our way and said, “Sorry.”

Monty said nothing. I couldn’t tell if it had rubbed him the wrong way or not.

“I’ll help you take care of him,” I offered, even though digging a six-foot ditch was the last thing I wanted to do.

Monty glanced at where Richmond was lying, then shook his head. “Leave him.”

We went inside, the girls quickly breaking off from us and going up into the lodge’s second floor to make use of the bathroom. God, a shower with some hot water was going to be amazing. I could practically feel it hitting me now, relaxing my muscles... Not to mention that there wouldn’t be anything better than getting in there with all the girls at once, but... there wasn’t going to be time for that, I could tell.

Elijah was standing in the doorway that led to the kitchen, clearly hoping to talk to me alone. I debated pretending not to pick up on his signals, but I figured that would just be a bad look. Plus, the guy *had* just risked his life in that fight.

I followed him into the kitchen, trying not to look too reluctant about it.

The smell of blood mingled with the scent of pine that clung to everything in the lodge. The counters were made from solid black marble, the wood dark, the walls bright white. It was somehow both old-fashioned and modern, mingled together into one opulent place of wild luxury.

In other words, someone had paid a hell of a lot of money to make something expensive look like it was less expensive, and they had failed.

“You good?” I asked Elijah.

He nodded. “I’m fine.” Then he closed the door so no one else could come in. “But I need to talk to you about something.”

“Sounds like the kind of something no one wants to deal with.” I let out a heavy sigh and leaned back against the counter. “Alright, let me hear it. What else happened while I was fighting Mikel?”

Elijah cocked his head to the side, then shook it. “Nothing happened during the fight. But... I have something that I need to suggest.”

“About... us staying here for the night? I agree with Fero. It’s best to stay here under cover and then regroup and head back to the Academy in the morning.”

You know, because it was a smart tactical decision... and not because the literal only thing that I wanted to do was curl up in a heap somewhere with my eyes closed and pretend that I was boneless. No more moving, no more problem-solving. Just a warm blanket and a nap.

“It’s not about that either. It’s about the professor.” A pause, then Elijah’s lips pulled into a thin line. “I wasn’t expecting that.”

I nodded. “I was... but not until the very last moment.” I sighed. “I’d trusted him from the very first moment I arrived. But clearly, I shouldn’t have.”

“We might want to consider extending that same caution to Monty,” he said in a very low whisper. “I just don’t know that it would be possible for Monty to have had no idea what his father was up to.”

Instantly, my mood turned sour. “Are you suggesting that Monty’s involved in all of this?”

Elijah, clearly sensing my displeasure with the implication, said, “It’s something to consider. There isn’t a soul at the Academy who didn’t trust Richmond Blue. I’m not suggesting that you do anything drastic. I’m just saying that it might be worth keeping an eye on him and handling things a little bit more cautiously.”

The door clicked open. Remmy stepped inside, rattling off, “I wasn’t listening in, insert lame excuse here, yadda, yadda, you’re being stupid.”

We both turned to stare at him.

Elijah's hackles raised. "You realize that this was a private conversation, right? That was the whole point of closing the door?"

"Yeah, sure, but it was a stupid conversation, and I'm hungry." Remmy started to raid the cabinets, looking for something to eat. He scrounged up a can of nacho cheese and a package of saltines, both of which he ripped into. In a true display of a college appetite, he began to dip the saltines into the thick, salty nacho cheese dip before shoveling them into his mouth.

"It's not stupid; it's sensible," insisted Elijah.

"It's stupid," said Remmy between mouthfuls. There was yellow cheese, neon yellow, clinging to his fingers. "I've never seen a bloke more ready to throw down over Victor than him. He's about as loyal as they come."

"Remmy's right," I said firmly. "I understand that you don't know Monty very well, and we're all a bit in shock over what happened with Richmond. But that doesn't actually mean anything. I trust Monty with my life, and you should too."

"Ditto," Remmy said.

Elijah clearly wasn't happy with that response, but he didn't have the nerve to argue with a statement from his prime alpha, so he just made a sour sound in the back of his throat, then turned and stalked out of the room.

The kitchen door closed behind him.

Remmy offered me the tube of saltine crackers. I took one from him, giving the canned nacho cheese—goddamn, it smelled like metal more than anything else—a firm pass, then went to go take a shower of my own.

Unfortunately, by the time that I got there, the girls were not only bathed and dressed but passed out in a heap on the ground, comforters and blankets pulled around them. I got my shower alone.

The hot water was still an incredible fucking balm.





We left early in the morning. No one had much to say. Overnight, we had all sort of... crashed and burned. Emotions had been at an all-time high, and now they were at an all-time low. We would be making the trip back to the Academy alone. I led the way, with Petra on my left and Monty on my right.

I made sure to let him come up at my side, proving that I still trusted him to be my right-hand man. Literally. There was no talking. No conversation. Dawn turned to high noon. We were moving slower this time around. We were tired, we were thinking, we were... all a bit in our own heads.

Monty was on my mind.

I trusted him. That wasn't a false narrative by any means. I trusted him, and I would until the day I had a reason not to—a day that I knew in my heart of hearts would never come. But that didn't mean I wasn't worried about him.

Richmond Blue having always been dead was big talk, and while it had worked in the fight... killing your own dad was going to mess anyone up. I was worried about him, and I wanted him to know without a shadow of a doubt that I was there for him. That I was going to do anything that I could to *stay* there for him.

Eventually, we got to the spot where the van had been left. As it turned out, Cass and Remmy were the only two people who knew how to drive stick shift. Cass drove the first half of the way and Remmy the second half.

We still weren't talking, even to discuss what had happened and what would be happening later. There was just silence. Petra was curled up against my side, same as she had been before, and as we trundled down the dirt road that led to the Academy, passing through the wards that would confuse any human hikers that happened to come out this way, we realized that...

Everyone already knew.

People were outside, waiting. And while they could have just been waiting for our return, I knew better from the way that they were standing, the way that they were looking. News traveled fast in shifter society, and somehow, it had already reached the grounds of Apex Academy.

Professor Anders was waiting for us in the parking lot behind the building, where Academy vehicles were stowed. Slowly, one by one, we got out of the van.

The woman looked us over, her gaze sharp, then said, "I don't think it needs to be said that I must speak with the prime in private."

I gave Petra a kiss on the cheek and ran my fingers through Bree's mane of hair. "I figured as much. Why don't you girls go and settle down somewhere? If you want to—"

"We'll wait for you in your room," said Bree smugly.

She grabbed me and kissed me, and it wasn't chaste at all, despite the fact that our teacher was *right* there. I might have let go of most of my preconceptions about public displays of affection, but that one still made the side of my neck feel hot.

You know, just because I had a lot of respect for Professor Anders.

The girls parted ways, arms curled around Isa and hands pulling at Lillin, making sure that they both knew they were invited and expected to go along with them. The generals went next, with Fero eager to go and rest for real, while several others headed off to the dining hall for a feast.

Monty lingered.

Professor Anders turned to him and, with all the seriousness that a woman could muster, said, “I am terribly sorry about your loss, Montague. I would like to speak with you about this as well, when I’m done with the prime.”

Monty ducked his head down. He could tell that he was being dismissed, and though it was pretty obvious that he didn’t *want* to go, he was still listening. Three days ago, he would have argued. But he looked tired and worn, and today, he just stepped away and vanished around the side of the building.

“Monty had nothing to do with his father’s betrayal,” I said, turning my gaze onto Professor Anders. “I’m not open to discussion on that.”

“We aren’t here to discuss your generals, Victor,” said Professor Anders. “The Dean needs to speak with you.” Her eyes flashed. “And so do I.”

She led me into the Academy through a back door. The building was silent. I was certain that the generals were out there getting mobbed by people, everyone demanding to know what had happened and have their questions answered.

I was almost glad to be pulled into... whatever this was.

I followed her along the stairs and towards the Dean’s office. It was part of the center building, on the very top floor. I had never actually been in there. The Dean didn’t come out much; he was an older man, according to campus talk, and he always tried to stay out of the limelight when he could.

I figured that it was something pretty serious—and likely school-related—if he wanted to speak to me.

We stopped outside of the door. I reached for the handle, but Professor Anders reached past me and put her palm flat to the wood, holding it shut. “When we’re finished here, there will be a lot that you need to deal with. You will be inundated with questions. I will come and find you in the near future, and we will discuss that and... something else. Do *not* mention this conversation to the Dean.”

“You don’t trust him,” I said.

Professor Anders's mouth pulled into a thin line. "The Dean is very focused on the Academy. And that isn't *wrong*. Apex Academy is a vital part of our culture and our house. But I have found that he is prone to making decisions that will benefit it at the cost of other aspects of our world. I am not saying to listen to him or to listen to me. I'm only asking you to hear out both options before deciding."

I nodded at her, just once, and she pulled her hand away from the door. This time, when I went to open it, Professor Anders let me.

The inside of the office was large. It could have fit an entire alpha bedroom in there. The left wall was covered in bookcases, and the tomes resting on that shelf were covered in dust. They had clearly not been moved in years nor been cleaned in just as long. The wall opposite it, on the right, held a single door in the center.

The wall on either side of the door was covered in oil portraits, some of which I imagined must have been the head portraits of previous deans. All of them seemed to be staring at me with their black, nearly lifeless gazes. The others contained simple pictures of the forest that surrounded the property. The oil portraits were well done, but they also seemed deceptively simple, considering the office in question.

Situated at the wall directly across from us was a large desk. Seriously large. Like, I had never seen a desk that large before. It was also piled full, one end of it totally stacked up with teetering towers of papers in various stages of being read and signed, and the other occupied by a huge computer, state of the art despite the fact that it was a desktop. The monitor sat on the floor at the side of it, and the Dean himself sat in a chair behind it.

The chair was massive and oversized, which just made the Dean seem even more small.

I was right about him being old.

Massively old.

Like, the kind of old that you couldn't understand as being genuinely still totally alive. He was nothing but pale skin and wrinkles, with a mane of white hair that spoke to his lycan heritage. His outfit consisted of a dark maroon three-piece suit atop a black button-down shirt with classy glass buttons. Despite the computer, there were ink stains on his gnarled fingers, and his bushy white brows hung low over his piercing blue eyes.

“Victor,” said the Dean. He did not get up. I didn't blame him. It seemed pretty imperative to everyone that the guy spend as much time sitting as possible.

I sat down in the chair across from him. This was another one of those power balancing acts. I was the prime alpha, but I was also a student at Apex Academy. I was in charge of the house, but he was in charge of, well, everything that had to do with the Academy.

Not only that, but he was a senior alpha. Judging by the looks of him, he might have been the single most senior alpha around. Rude, but true. And that meant something. Plus, like Professor Anders had said, the Apex Academy was a founding part of our society.

The Academy was a useful part of shifter society, especially for people like me who might have been raised by a human relative. My story was convoluted, but it wasn't always that way. Say a man marries someone who's not a shifter. They die in a car crash, and their kid gets shuttled off halfway across the world to live with a human aunt that's never once heard about shifters and doesn't believe in magic.

Then the day comes around where their shift wakes up, and bam—that's what the Academy was for. It helped you figure out your history. It helped you figure out how to live in a pack or on your own. It helped you figure out what the world really held, including magic and alchemy and enchantments. And then it taught you how to handle your instincts, which were so loud when you first shifted.

The Dean cleared his throat. “I think that it would be an obvious statement to say that the world has already heard of

your actions.”

“I figured as much,” I said. “Word travels fast. How’s that happen, huh? Are there people out there who can talk to the crows and the lizards?”

“In a manner of speaking,” said the Dean, though he gave a wave of his gnarled hand that managed to somehow dismiss the thought at the same time.

I frowned a little bit. That had been a serious question. Before I could push at it more, though, the Dean placed both hands on the desk and cleared his throat. It was a phlegmy sound, though it was also pretty clear that he was vying for attention.

I gave it to him, only a little reluctantly. Maybe I would ask Petra about the way news spread later on. She would give me a straightforward answer, I was sure.

“You have done something that no previous prime alpha was able to do at such a young age,” said the Dean, “and it is vital that you not only become aware of that yourself but also understand the options that it provides you.”

“Options?”

“As the youngest prime alpha that House Blackstone has ever seen, you have the ability to simply... not come back,” said the Dean.

“To the Academy?”

“That is correct. You have surpassed the strength of your fellow students.” I couldn’t tell if he was irritated about that or for it all happening.

My lips pursed. “I feel like there’s a but coming.”

“There’s no but,” said the Dean. “I simply would advise you keep in mind and consider the fact that the Academy can offer you much more than simply training in battle. Our historians, our enchanters, and our studies are the greatest bar none.”

“So, you want me to *choose* to stay.” I paused, then cocked my head to the side. “Guess that would look pretty good for

the Academy, huh? If I was given the chance to go but then chose to stay instead?”

The Dean’s eyes shined. “It would simply be advisable. There are many things that we can teach you, and though it is a basis to our society, fighting is far from the only thing that a prime alpha must learn to do.”

Right.

Like the fact that I had no idea how their news spread so fast. Runners, sure. But there had been no runners out where we fought. And there was the fact that our classes hadn’t even covered ruts yet, and I was only barely starting to grasp the bare basics of alchemy...

But the school had also proven to be unsafe so far. And that was something I needed to consider.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I said, standing up. “The semester is about to come to a close anyway, right? I’ll let you know my decision before I leave for the summer.”

I didn’t wait to be dismissed, instead simply giving him a respectful nod and then turning to step back into the hallway.

See? A balance of power. I respected him enough to listen, but I was high enough in the ranks that I didn’t need to be dismissed from the table.

Honestly, I had already made up my mind.

It would be stupid not to finish up the year and even more stupid to not come back. But the Dean didn’t need to know that just yet.

Let him sweat it out for a bit, right?



To my surprise, only Petra was waiting for me when I got back to the room, already stripped down and bared to me. Well, maybe I wasn't really surprised. She didn't really like the idea of other people being around while we were intimate with each other, and she had seemed pretty needy out in the van on the ride here, touching me and pressing close to me.

"You look just as beautiful as ever," I said, stepping over to her and settling between her spread legs, my hands curling over the jut of her smooth shoulders. I petted her skin and leaned down to kiss her, our lips passionately melding together, our tongues stroking and touching.

She smelled amazing. I could lose myself in her scent. I often had in the past and was more than happy to do it again in the here and now.

I curled one arm around her middle, pulling her over to the edge of the bed. Petra let me, but only for a moment. She wiggled out from my grip and turned over on her hands and knees on the mattress, presenting her ass to me.

"Could we... I just need to feel you," said Petra, shaking her rump a bit. Her tail gave a cute little wag. The sight made my mouth water. "I just need to know that everything's okay."

"Everything *is* okay," I told her, hands already dropping down to undo my belt and the front of my slacks. I shoved them both down, letting the dark fabric curl around my feet, then kicked them and the boxers off fully as I climbed onto the bed with her.



Who was I to turn down an offer like this one?

No one—that's who.

I plastered the small of her back and the curve of her spine with open-mouthed kisses, even as I slipped a hand between her legs and stroked her clit, rubbing the outside of her labia.

“I'll show you that it's all okay, Petra. I'm right here with you.” Then I let a reassuring purr rumble out of my chest. My fingers stroked her clit to slit and then probed up inside, relishing in the tight, velvet heat of her pussy.

I gave a low groan and pressed my forehead between her shoulder blades. The way that she was presenting herself to me made all of my mating instincts go absolutely haywire. I wanted to take her, claim her, breed her, have her, own her. The thoughts echoed in my mind, so loud that I couldn't think through them.

I pulled my hand away and rose up onto my knees, guiding the head of my cock to her slick, dripping opening instead.

“This what you want?” I asked her, goading her on. “You want me to fuck your pretty little pussy, Petra?”

She gave a soft whine, pressing her forehead to the mattress and folding her arms over the bedding in front of her.

“Yes,” she whined. “Yes, yes, yes.”

So I did. I pressed into her, fucking her hard and fast and giving her everything. I curled over her back, sweaty skin to sweaty skin, and panted into her ear. I loved her, and I took her, and I bit onto the side of her neck and claimed her a second time all over again.

And in the wake of it all, cum on the sheets, we tangled up together so that her pretty little head was resting on my chest.

“Where are you going after this?” Petra asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, when the semester ends. It's rounding up soon.” She used the tips of her fingers to draw designs on my chest. “And I wanted, you know, to know.”

“It sounds like you already have somewhere in mind,” I told her, stroking my palm firmly over the curve of her ribs. “And that’s probably for the best. So much has happened, I haven’t even *begun* to think about that.”

Petra was silent for a moment, thinking. Then she said, “You could come home with me.”

“With you, huh? I think that would make the other girls pretty jealous.” It wasn’t quite a chiding remark, just a light reminder that even though she was first, they were all equals. They all deserved my time, my attention, and my love.

Petra’s cheeks went pink. “I meant... Not just you, dummy!” She sat up, pulling the blanket up to her chest as if we hadn’t just fucked—as if there was any modesty left to be found between us. “I meant all of you.”

“Really?”

“My family has a big compound. We can stay in one of the guest houses. It might be nice to actually get to know everyone, since we haven’t really... done that yet.”

“Things moved fast,” I agreed. “Getting to just relax with you all...”

“There’s a pool. And a hot tub too.”

“You don’t need to keep sweetening the deal.” I laughed, sitting up so I could rest my cheek on her shoulder. “I want to come with you. I’ll talk to the other girls about it tomorrow too. We’ll see what they all have to say, but I doubt that anyone is going to have an objection.”

I hoped not, at least. The idea of having somewhere to go—of not having to try and fight to figure all of this out—was the kind of much-needed balm I wanted for a wound I hadn’t even been aware of.

Leave it to Petra to always figure that sort of shit out. She was always smart about that sort of thing.



The dining hall was as crowded as ever the next day, with tables piled full of people. They were pushing and shoving, each one trying to get with their picked-out buddy for the day. Honestly, the school was getting ready to come to a close, and that meant everyone was trying to make plans just like this one.

Cass, Lillin, and Bree were all down at the table we normally sat at, waiting for it.

I set down my breakfast plate—fresh-cooked scrambled eggs with loads of cheese, and then a carnivore spread. Everything from crispy bacon to links of sausage and slices of Canadian bacon that had been cooked to perfection so just the edges of it were crispy. There were pieces of rare steak spilling red blood over the rest, soaking even the scrambled cheesy eggs in that delicious juice.

“Petra had an idea last night,” I said.

Her cheeks instantly went pink. “Don’t make me ask!”

Bree’s ears pricked up. “Oh, that sounds juicy! What kind of an idea? Is it a fun one? Does it involve a bedroom?”

“It does, but not in the way you’re thinking,” I told her with a laugh. “What are your plans for between semesters?”

Bree tilted her head slightly. “Don’t have any.”

Cass and Lillin didn’t answer nor did they need to. Neither girl had family to return to, which honestly made this offer just that much more perfect.

I said, “Petra thought we should all spend time together at one of the guest houses on the Haliday compound.”

“Oh, that *does* sound fun,” said Bree. “And it *could* involve a bedroom the way I’m thinking about them.”

Even Cass and Lillin seemed sold on the idea. That meant I just needed to convince Isa about it. Only she didn’t come by our table for breakfast.

As the other girls left, Lillin caught me and admitted, “You haven’t claimed her yet. She didn’t think it was a good idea to come out here. I told her that she was just in her own head about it, but... she didn’t believe me.”

“I’ll handle it,” I promised her, and then set off to find Isa.

It was easy enough. She was out on the backside of the campus, having her breakfast beneath the boughs of an old oak tree.

“Isa,” I said.

Her head snapped up, eyes wide. She was quick to scramble to her feet, but before she could rattle off any sort of apologies or explanations, I hooked an arm around her waist, pulled her in close, and kissed her.

“You realize that you still owe me a date, right?” I asked.

Isa’s cheeks went pink. “I wasn’t sure if you meant it.”

“I meant it. And I know exactly the place. We’re going to be staying at Petra’s house between semesters, the other girls and I.” I kissed her again, chaste on the corner of the mouth, and held her close as could be.

I wanted her to know that even with all of this going on, she was important to me. She was something that mattered, and while I hadn’t claimed her just yet... there would be plenty of time for that at the house.

“You’re going to come with us, aren’t you?”

Her eyes went wide. “You want me to come with you all?”

“I want you to be my mate,” I told her. “So yes, I absolutely do.”

The hug that she gave me was more than answer enough.



The school year ended the same way that it always did apparently, with a great hunt that all of the shifters took part in. I was given the honor of leading the hunt.

We gathered at the very edge of the property line just before twilight hit. The sky was beginning to grow dark, the air starting to get cool. A few stray fireflies were flitting about, blinking and flashing their lights almost lazily.

“Tonight,” I said, “we celebrate. We celebrate all that we have done, all that we will come to do, and all that we will come to be. Apex Academy is home to people that will *become* something. Something great.”

The eyes of all my teachers and fellow students were on me. The mates. The generals. The people I only knew by name and those I only knew by shift and class.

I took a breath. “Our year has been long, and it has rattled many of us straight to our core. But that changes nothing. House Blackstone will rise, just as it always has, just as it always will. And tonight, we prove it.”

A pause for dramatic effect.

“Tonight”—I raised my voice into a shout and threw one hand up into the air—“we hunt!”

And then I let my bear kin shift take over, and I bellowed.

All around me, the other shifters did the same thing. Their bodies rippled and changed as they took on their forms, five different phenotypes coming together for their first shared

hunt. I turned and led them into the woods around the Academy.

It went very successfully.

I didn't just lead the hunt. I made the first kill, and that was something special. I could hear the cries of success going up all around the forest. We were all making our kills. We were giving ourselves over, however briefly, to the animal instincts inside of us.

It wasn't just a learning experience.

It was an experience to bond with the whole of the house, and for the students to know what it meant to truly be part of a pack. It was something that not everyone had grown up with, and not everyone understood.

The way I saw it, our second semester would have more of these. Small pack hunts that would go out to promote bonding and teach us how to interact in the wild. Lessons on shifter etiquette, on rut, on the things we would need in the day-to-day.

That was another reason that I had decided to stay.

I didn't have anyone outside of the Academy to teach me those things. I needed to learn them if I was going to be a good prime alpha.

And fuck it all, I would be a *great* one. Not just in the history books for my strength, but for the strides that I took in reshaping our house and bringing the Blackstone name back to a place of glory.

It wasn't just going to be about blood and violence—not anymore.

Of course, there wasn't just a hunt.

Rounding up the end of the semester was a dance, and one that everyone rushed off to start prepping for as soon as the hunt finished, me included.



The dance was amazing. It was held both inside and outside, though most of the girls wanted to be outside. Something about the open stars and the fairy lights strung up just made things seem that much more amazing.

There wasn't a single girl that wasn't amazing, gorgeous, and ready to spend time with me.

Bree found me first, wearing a sexy, sultry number. She flung her arms around my neck, but she didn't stay that way. We didn't dance so much as we ground against each other, Bree laughing whenever her tail got in the way.

The moment that she caught sight of Lillin, she gave an excited squeal. "Get over here!"

She grabbed Lillin by the wrist and pulled her close. The black dress that Lillin wore had big, voluminous sleeves on it and made her skin seem twice as pale as usual.

Though Lillin and Bree weren't together romantically, they both still had a lot of fun with each other. I could tell that they were really just enjoying the company, and that they had a lot of shared interests.

Warmth and pleasure bloomed inside of me. I loved seeing my mates get along like that.

Our dance was only a three-way partnership for a moment, as I soon caught sight of Isa standing over the punch with Coriander. I gave Bree and Lillin both a kiss and then excused myself, heading over.



Isa's dress was baby pink, all frills, and so totally fit her. It made me smile to see it.

At her side was Coriander. She was a cute delta girl with soft features. Bear ears stuck out of tousled black hair, which was shaggier at the back than it was at the front. She had a single pearl clipped into it, keeping the bangs held back out of her face.

Monty had been head over heels for her for ages and was actually the main driving reason I had decided to try and make a difference with how the deltas had been treated.

I just... needed to try and make things right.

"Victor," said Coriander. She looked nervous to see me.

"Where's Monty?" I asked.

Coriander said, "He's just over there. He's, uh, talking with someone."

I glanced towards where she was looking. Monty was easy to spot. In his nice button-up shirt and black suit jacket, he looked almost like his father.

At least, he looked like the man we'd all thought his father had been.

The guy he was talking to was avidly anti-delta, which was probably what the huzzah was over. Didn't matter. I trusted that Monty could put him in his place without disrupting the whole dance.

"You two having fun?" I asked.

"I think so," said Isa.

"You think so?"

Isa laughed. "There are a lot of people out here!"

"There are less people on the dance floor," I told her, grabbing her hands and pulling her out. "Have fun, Coriander."

She waved a hand at me as I hurried out, pulling Isa along with me. We soon found ourselves surrounded by other

shifters, her hands on my shoulders and mine on her waist.

“I’m not great at dancing,” I warned her.

Isa’s cheeks were bright, bright pink. She gave a huff of laughter and pressed her face against my shoulder. “Neither am I.”

“Better at it than I am,” I told her. When we spun, I caught sight of Bree. I gave a sharp bark, and she yipped once in return.

Isa asked, “What—?”

But I was already spinning her out. Bree latched onto one hand and pulled her close, laughing and swaying as she hauled Isa over to where she and Lillin were dancing.

“Come on,” said Bree. “Join the party!”

I left Bree to work at getting Isa out of her shell and back into the game, mostly because the crowd had parted enough for me to make out Cass. She was talking to Fero.

“Hey.” I wrapped an arm around Cass’s waist, pulling her against me. “We should do the challenge on the mountain together. I’ll send you an invite.”

“Really?” Fero asked, perking up visibly.

Cass asked, “What mountain?”

“An online game,” I told her.

It got me an eye roll from Cass, but Fero launched into a spiel about the time and the place and how he would make sure to be there. Our back and forth went on until Cass caught my face in both of her hands and kissed me.

“I love you,” she said, “but go find Petra and talk to her about this.”

“You should play it with me over the summer,” I teased her.

I had very briefly spoken to Cass about my former gaming habits and had swiftly established that, while Bree might have been willing to give it a try, Cass had quite literally never used

the computer for anything other than her schoolwork. It had been part of her upbringing, sure, but she also just didn't see the appeal in it.

To each their own... but the game was so important to me, I was hoping that I might be able to change her mind on it at some point.

"It is fun," insisted Fero. "You should give it a try, Cass."

She looked at him as though he had just dealt her a personal betrayal. Fero blinked back at her, dovey smile still on his face.

"Really," he insisted, "it is fun. It grows on you, and your mate is the best in the game. The top of the leaderboards."

"I used to be," I quickly corrected.

Fero snorted and shook his head. He took a long sip of his punch out of a tall glass cup and then pointed out, "You would still be, if you had more time. I am certain that you will be back at the top by the time the next semester starts. Shadowclaw cannot be kept down for long."

"I'll take it." Turning to Cass, I said, "Come on, babe. You should at least give it a chance this summer. You can come on the mountain quest with us. It's a big deal in the game."

"Never going to happen," said Cass, shooing me off. "Accept it and move on." She waved a hand at me. "Literally. You missed out on your chance to have a dance with me. Go on, get out of here."

It was fine, because I really did want to go find Petra. Laughing, I turned away from the other woman and made my way down towards the main dancing area, a little bit closer to where the music was coming from.

It was easy enough to find Petra. Her dress was yellow and white, glittering; it looked like it belonged to a princess somewhere, accenting the soft whites and blue undertones of her fur. Her ears pricked up when she saw me.

"Victor," shouted Petra, grabbing her skirt in one hand and hefting it up so she didn't step on it as she hurried towards me.

Her heels gave her an extra few amazing inches. “I was looking for you!”

“Yeah? Were you?”

“Of course I was. I wanted a dance with you, stupid.” Petra swatted me on the chest lightly, then pressed a hand to the side of my face and crashed against me in a kiss. I was quick to kiss her back, deepening it.

When we parted, Petra’s cheeks were pink, her eyes bright with what could only be love and excitement. I felt the same brightness swelling up inside of me.

She was gorgeous. She looked amazing. She smelled amazing. The night was winding to a close around us, and holding her in my arms made it feel as though everything that we had been working towards was starting to pay off—or maybe like it had all paid off already.

The music swelled around us into the last dance, and we made our way to where the other girls were already waiting.

Petra giggled when she caught sight of Isa, thoroughly wrapped up in Bree’s arms and pulled against the lycan’s chest. “Having fun?”

“I hope that you have all had fun,” said Professor Anders. My head snapped towards her. “But if you have a moment, Victor, there is something that we need to discuss.”

I was being pulled away from the group by Professor Anders. There was no way around it. I guessed that we were going to be having that talk after all.

In the wake of the Dean having already left for the end of the semester—he had taken off the night before—and Professor Blue’s betrayal, she had become the most senior of the teachers. It was strange to see her standing there in a dress.

The gown had a slit in the side of it that went all the way up to her hip, showing off a heavily scarred thigh.

I joked, “You’re a little late if you were hoping to get a dance too, Professor.”

She smiled back at me. “And it’s very unfortunate that it took me so long to get here. I had to finish a few... matters elsewhere.”

“And now?”

“Now, I wanted to ensure that you would be coming back next year,” said Professor Anders. “We need to make sure that the prime alpha is as educated as possible. While it’s your decision, it’s one that I would highly recommend.”

It honestly hadn’t even crossed my mind that not attending school again next year was an option. My human college had been a four-year course. Shifters only did two semesters, and the one next year was going to cover how to handle rut.

That was something that I knew I couldn’t miss.

As the prime alpha, I needed to cram myself full of as much information as I possibly could. There was no end to the problems that I would face. House Renoire might have been handled for now, but that didn’t mean that my job was over.

If anything, it meant that my job was about to get that much harder. I knew that there were going to be other threats, ones that I didn’t know about yet. Things that would come up over the summer or during the next semester.

I knew that my girls would have spats. My generals and I were likely to have disagreements. And the idea of cutting my education short just out of, what, spite for the fact that these shifters were older, that they were elders? Yeah, that wasn’t going to happen.

“I’m going to be here next semester,” I told her.

Professor Anders wasn’t the sort to smile all that much, but her brows lifted, and a pleased look settled on her features. “That’s good to know. Have you decided on how you’ll get here?”

“I—no, actually. I think that I might come with one of my girls.” I gestured over my shoulder at where Petra and Lillin were talking.

The music had shut off, but the lights strung up all over the grounds were still on. Blinking, sparkling things. It turned the whole scene into something that was almost surreal—a glorious flash of color and light, and my beautiful women beneath it like fae.

“I would like to offer you a car,” said Professor Anders.

“Like, what?” I frowned at her.

“Come with me.” Professor Anders turned and started to walk.

I glanced over my shoulder, a little put out that I wouldn’t be walking any of them back to their rooms—let alone staying there tonight—but I did as the teacher asked. I had already committed to learning as much as I could, and that meant I had to do it when the opportunity arose.

Plus, I didn’t actually *own* a car.

Professor Anders led me into the Academy. “When a prime alpha attends the Academy, a singular elder alpha is assigned as their coach. Due to Blue’s previous allegiances, the Dean thought that he was a good fit for you. I disagreed.”

I snorted.

Professor Anders continued, “He was too focused on keeping you in the dark, making you reliant on him. We were not allowed to counter this. We are... We are *your* elders, but you are still our prime. To have too many of us giving you orders...” She shook her head as we walked. “It just isn’t done.”

Everyone else was still out in the courtyard, having their party. Our footsteps seemed to echo in the room, getting louder with each turn that we took.

She led us to a hallway that held a large painting. The painting showed the original founders of the Academy. The crest was behind them.

The crest itself was a shield with several animals attached to it. A wolf head at the top, with the shield broken into three squares, each of which contained another animal. There was a

lynx, a bear, and a lizard. That represented the founders' shift forms.

Their avian cohort had been brought on after the original founding and thus left out of the painting.

Professor Anders explained, "But I prescribe to a different method. I think that the best way for you to be protected is to make sure that you are as informed as possible. And that means you need to be able to have access to everything that we can offer."

She reached up and pulled the painting from the wall, setting it aside and revealing a safe.

"Come here," she said.

I did as I was told.

She showed me the combination. The safe opened. Inside was another keypad, which I was also shown how to use. There was a rumble of mechanics, and then the wall behind us slid open, revealing a slanting tunnel.

Professor Anders led me down the tunnel. It was dark, and the slope was so sharp that it was almost hard to keep our balance. Only animal instincts kept us up.

As Professor Anders walked, she explained, "We attempt to keep the secrets of Apex Academy under wraps. The more people know what we have at our facility, the more people are going to try and make a go at it. But we are designed to have your best experience in mind."

I snickered. It sounded like she had taken that straight from the email that they'd sent me to try and goad me into coming.

*Our school is one of the most exclusive in the country, and we only accept the best students into our program, it had said. We can offer you lessons, tools, and camaraderie. Though our claims may seem high, we can assure you we hold all those on our staff to the highest order. We only offer lessons that will help you better deal with the challenges you face.*

At the time, I had thought that it was a whole lot of bullshit. But having been at the Academy for a while, I could

see that it was true. Apex Academy came from old money. It had been around since the start of our house. It was meant to make alphas into better members of society—and to give me the tools that I would need to rule over them.

The slope bottomed out into what I could only call a surveillance room of sorts. There was a wiry-looking avian hunched over a computer nearby, several other monitors lined up. Three adjacent doors led into other rooms, and one wall contained a cabinet of sorts.

“We are here to help all of our alphas, but Apex Academy was also uniquely formed to help boost the younger prime alphas that would show up,” said Professor Anders. She opened one of the cabinets and pulled out both of the contents within. “These should have been given to you at the start.”

One of the items was a key, which I could only imagine belonged to the car that she had mentioned previously. The other was a thumb drive, black and simple. It had PA carved into the front of it.

She explained, “This contains all of the information that Blue was supposed to give you. An orientation program of sorts. You should have already received it.”

“I mean, looking back, I guess we know why he didn’t want me to have this,” I said. “The more I knew, the harder it would have been for him to pull the wool over my eyes and get me to trust him.” I was grateful for the flash drive all the same. I would plug it into the computer at the first opportunity and see how far it got me.

Professor Anders’s mouth went tight, and her ears flipped back flat against the curve of her skull. “Hindsight. The one thing that most of us can never beat.”

I laughed, knowing that she was talking about the rare trait for shifters to become seers. It would have been great if more of us had that sixth sense to rely on, but my instincts had shown me enough so far.

The rest of the tour was simple. We didn’t go through any of the doors, but she explained that one of them contained the



item that powered all the sigils and protective wards that had been set up around the campus. The monitors were meant to try and keep an eye on some of the borders of the main territory—the places where it butted up against other houses.

As it turned out, the shifters lived in a bit of a surveillance state. Several family properties were being monitored as well: Those that were known for working with other houses, mainly, but also those that were known for having caused disturbances in the past. Basically, it kept track of domestic terrorists poised against the prime alpha.

Who would have guessed it, right?

I couldn't say that it was a bad idea, considering how many shifters I had already discovered were sneaky, underhanded louses.

I was told that someone would move the car to the front gate for me in the morning and that the wall would close back up behind me when I left.

Right before I exited, Professor Anders said, "What happened was an unfortunate situation. Being paired with someone that did not truly want to show you anything. I can assure you, come your second semester here, there will be no secrets beyond your reach."

I believed her.



The end of the semester came and went. I was thrilled to have made it through the year. A thank-you was sent to me by the Dean in the form of a basket of gadgets that would supposedly be helpful for my studies next year, and then came the time I had been dreading. The first phone call with Aaron since he'd dropped me off what felt like a lifetime ago. The man had, unsurprisingly, already heard what happened.

"I knew that you would be a good prime," said Uncle Aaron. "You should come back between semesters. I know that the family home isn't much, but..."

"It's a nice offer, but it's not one that I need. I've got somewhere to go." Just the thought was enough to make me giddy. My heart beat harder in my chest.

"Back to that other college of yours?" Uncle Aaron asked.

I laughed. "Yeah, I don't think that I'll be going back there any time soon."

We only talked for a little bit, but it was a good time all the same. I didn't have much family, and it was *nice* to have this moment. Even if we didn't really agree on things... Even if I was still sore that he had just thrown me to the proverbial wolves.

"I'll keep in touch with you," I told him.

Before he got off, Uncle Aaron said, "You know, I think that they would have been proud of you."

"Mom and Dad?"

“Yeah, the both of them. And I know it doesn’t mean half as much, but know that I was being serious when I said that, boy. I’m proud of you. You’ve got the makings of greatness in you; I can feel it.”

Warmth bloomed inside of me. I told him that I was glad he thought as such and then hung up to finish getting ready. Just like on the way in, most of our belongings would either stay over the middle gap of the semesters or they would be shipped out for us.

The girls were already outside waiting for me, and the generals would be coming out with us as well. Added protection, just in case something went wrong.

Considering everything that had already happened, I had decided that it didn’t hurt to be careful.

Monty was the last one to show up, and he had Coriander hanging off his arm. They had publicly come out as dating at the big dance that we put together.

Everyone loaded up but Monty, who caught me by the arm. He turned his back to the others and fished something out of his pocket. “Look at this.”

It was a small black box, the size of his palm.

I asked him, “What am I looking at?”

He used his thumb to pop the top of it open. Inside was red velvet, and tucked within the red velvet was a wedding ring.

It was gorgeous. A golden band with a crystal rose at the center of it and two smaller diamonds on either side. “I’m going to ask her to marry me, soon as we get somewhere pretty. Thanks for letting her come along. Thanks for everything, Victor. None of this would have been possible without you.”

“That is—wow.” I shook my head, somehow both surprised and not surprised at all. “You’re really going to do this?”

“I love her,” said Monty, “and I didn’t think that I would ever get to let the world know that. But thanks to you, they

can't say anything. They can't stop me. I know... I know that there are going to be a lot of people out there who still do not think we should be together. I'm not stupid."

I thought back to the conversation he'd had with someone at the dance, and I knew in my heart that would be something that was long lasting for him. Time and again, he would have to rise up. He would have to defend her, and defend that they were merely together.

Even though my word was law, people would hate it.

They would try to change it. They would try to take their anger out on the deltas around them. It would take a special sort of person, like Monty, to make sure that didn't happen.

"You really love her, huh?" I said, unable to keep the warmth from my voice.

"I do," said Monty. "And I get to show the whole world that now."

"Does she have any idea?" I asked.

Monty shook his head. "She was thrilled enough to get to come out. You know, spending the summer around a guy like you? That's a pretty big deal."

I couldn't help but preen a little bit, though I made sure not to let it get too far to my head. I told him instead, "You know, I think she's more interested in spending the summer with you. But thanks for the ego boost."

"Not like you need one." Monty chuckled. "Have you heard some of the things that they're saying about you? Not even out of the Academy, and they're already calling you the best prime alpha around."

He snapped the ring case shut and shoved it into his pocket, then turned and joined the others.

"I believe it," he said over his shoulder. That one *really* gave me a boost of pride. "Just so you know."

I went to follow, but before getting into the vehicle that would take us off of the Academy grounds, I turned and looked it over one last time.

I had never expected that email would change my life.

I sure as fuck hadn't thought it would change my life like *this*.

And yet, here I now was with a family and friends, with mates and a purpose. Something greater than just being a lawyer.

I had the entire second semester at Apex Academy waiting for me... and beyond that, I had the entire summer to spend at Petra's with my girls, my generals, and my best friend.

It didn't matter what challenges were still waiting for us.

I would meet them head-on... and I would win.

The End

## **APEX ACADEMY BOOKS AND OTHER PROJECT(S)**

For those who enjoyed the third book, thank you for all the support.

Update on series: Book 4 is being written and is expected for publication December 23: Pre Order Now.

Also, expect a book 1 from a new series in the months to come...

# ETHAN SHAW AUTHOR

Ethan Shaw is a socially awkward Weeb that decided to finally write the handful of books he swore he would so many years ago.

I love video games, my wife, and sometimes my day job. Give me Arizona desert nights. Ube flavored anything. A new fantasy book to crack open or a nap in the afternoon sun.

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