

RILEY STORM



SHARDS OF FATE
BOOK THREE

Conflicted Fated

Shards of Fate (Book Three)

Riley Storm

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All sexual activities depicted occur between consenting characters 18 years or older who are not blood related.

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Chapter One

No. It wasn't possible.

"W-what did you say?" I somehow managed to stammer as the world-shattering shock descended over me.

Blue eyes gazed down at me, regret dulling their brilliance into something pale and diffused. Eyes that belonged to a man I'd fallen hard and fast for. A man who wasn't the man I thought he was. He was something else. Something from the deepest, darkest past of our people.

"My name is Callistus. Once Alpha of the Calli pack." He sighed, shoulders sagging as something intangible left him. "And all this is my fault."

I stared at him blankly, my mind trying to process what he was telling me and meld it with what I knew of the man in front of me.

"You're Callistus?" I could hear the disbelief in my voice. "That's impossible."

"It's not."

"Callistus the Betrayer. Alpha of the Ninth pack, the ones who supposedly stabbed the others in the back? They were wiped out centuries ago when the Alphas bound Fate to the stones. Everyone knows that story, Kiel. They *died*, including their leader. Now, he's nothing more than a bogeyman used to scare children. You aren't that man."

"As a matter of fact, I am. I was there. I *did* stab them in the back in a last-ditch attempt to stop them from destroying our culture as we knew it," he said, his voice never wavering. His eyes, however, were not there. They were seeing something that had happened in the dustbin of history as far as most of our people were concerned. Something only he remembered.

Trying to reconcile everything I knew about Kiel with everything I'd been told about Callistus gave me a headache. Or maybe it was the fall down the mountainside to avoid the giant wolf statues that had nearly collapsed on me after our

wild flight from within the mountain. A mountain within which we'd left one of the immortal Alphas, one of Callistus' contemporaries.

"No."

Kiel—*nay*, Callistus frowned, his entire handsome face wrinkling. "No what? Jada, I am Callistus. I was there. Should we go dig up Lycaonus from under the cave-in and ask him? He'll tell you the same thing."

"I'm well aware," I said, my mind jumping to something Arcadus, another Alpha, had tried to taunt me with just before I tore his throat out. He'd made a comment about Kiel that hadn't made sense. Not until right then.

"So, then, you do believe me."

"I believe maybe you *were* Callistus," I said, gathering my hands under me and getting to my feet, rock dust settling around me. "Once upon a time, but you yourself have told me the truth. That the Alphas are not our saviors. Rather, they're tyrants, ruling us to further their own gains. I have *seen* that, with my own eyes. I have *also* seen the person you are. And that person is not the nightmare of bedtime stories for children. He is *not* someone to be afraid of or to run away from. You are *not that person*. Perhaps you *were* Callistus, but right now? Right now, you're *Kiel*. That's who you've become. That's what matters."

"No," Kiel said, also standing. He towered over me, his arms crossed, biceps and pecs flexing as he struggled to contain his emotions. "Jada, that's wrong."

"No, it's not. The person I know, the person in *here*"—I tapped that thick chest, my finger hammering hard into the rock-solid muscle—"that person is kind, giving, and selfless. He's no tyrant."

He flung his hands in the air in exasperation. "Don't you *get it*? I agreed with them! I was there. I helped forge the stones with those megalomaniac assholes! *I let it happen*. How can you possibly love someone like me who's responsible for so

much? You can't, and you shouldn't. I'm not worthy of the love of someone like you."

"I knew you were hiding something," I said, ignoring his outburst and trying to keep my voice calm so it didn't betray the flutter of my heart. "Something big. That much was fairly obvious. Too many hints. I should've picked up on it earlier. The way you could best the Nehringi assassins and even the other Alphas in a fight. You never seemed to be seriously wounded. Not to mention you played matchmaker with my mother and father, which must make you a lot older than you look. In hindsight, it's all so obvious."

"As I told you, I am him. Do you doubt me?"

I snorted heartily, adding a roll of my eyes, just in case he didn't pick up the first part of my answer. "You left that person behind a long time ago. You became someone else. You became Kiel."

"It's not as easy as that," he protested. "Think about it. There's no way all of this—the rebellion, the throwing-off of the Alphas—that the truth will not be revealed."

"So, why tell me now, then?"

"Because I wanted you to hear it from my lips. You deserve that much, at least."

I eyed him suspiciously. "So, you *do* care about me."

"Of course!" he shouted, throwing his arms up again. "Damn it, Jada. It was never about how *I feel about you*. It has everything to do with how *you feel about me*. Or how you *shouldn't* feel! There will never be any peace with me. Never any happiness. I will be banished. Even if we stop the Alphas, free Fate herself, and undo all the damage they've done, it won't be enough. Tales of me have spread for too long, the legends are too strong, too ingrained in the culture. Nobody will want me around. I will be banished. And you along with me. You have to let me go."

"No," I said, baring my teeth in challenge. "I won't go."

"Jada ..." he moaned, running his hands over his face and through his short hair.

“I will tell *new* stories,” I countered. “Stories about Kiel. The man who led the rebellion and freed our people from the Alphas. The man who fought back from the very start against them. Those are the stories they’ll hear. That’s the person they’ll come to know. They’ll remember you as I know you now.”

Kiel hung his head, shaking its lightly. “If only it was from the start,” he said morosely.

“What do you mean?” I reached out, touching him gently on the shoulder. “Kiel, tell me *everything*.”

He didn’t respond at first, and I thought he would refuse. A tremor ran its way through his body, strong enough that it resonated up my fingertips. Then he exhaled deeply and looked up at me with a haunted expression I knew I would never forget.

It was gone in an instant as he glanced past me, and his eyes narrowed, filling with anger. A moment later, there was a shout from farther up the mountain. I twisted, looking up the hill I’d fallen down as men in silvery steel armor poured over the edge toward us.

Chapter Two

Lycaonus' men had found us.

Angry at the interruption, I stepped around Kiel, rolling my neck and shoulders, loosening up my joints as I prepared to meet the oncoming wave of soldiers. Bending down, I reached for a hefty chunk of freshly fallen mountain rock and took aim.

A warm, gentle hand settled on my forearm as I hauled back, preparing to hurl the makeshift weapon.

"No," Kiel said softly, plucking the stone from my grip and tossing it to the side. "No more killing. Not today."

I looked back and forth between him and the oncoming wave of soldiers.

"Come. Let's run," he said, stepping back with his hand extended toward me.

"We could take them," I pointed out.

"Maybe," he agreed. "But not today. I'm tired of it, of the senseless deaths. Over the years, as Callistus, as Kiel, I've killed more of them than you can count. Too many have died for those assholes. If we don't have to do it today ..."

"Aren't you the one who told me that they were well aware of who they served? That each soldier knew the truth, that the Alphas are dictators, that they're evil through and through?" I questioned as the steel-clad soldiers grew closer.

"They understand," Kiel-Callistus said. "To a degree. I doubt many of the foot soldiers truly understand just how warped and perverted the Alphas' rule has become. But more than that, don't forget, there's a certain respect, a certain prestige, that comes with being a member of the Wulphere. That might begin to change, but for most of them, that was the case when they signed up. Once they're signed up, there's no getting out."

“Sure, there is,” I countered, nervously eyeing the soldiers as they cautiously picked their way down the mountainside, trying to avoid the recently fallen scree. The last thing either side wanted was to start a fresh landslide. “You just ... leave.”

“And do what? Tell the truth?” Kiel crossed his arms and stared impassively up the incline. “No, I don’t think so. I’ve often wondered how many of those I’ve killed wanted nothing more than to get out, to leave and tell the truth. Yet they never did because, if they’d tried, they would have found themselves—or worse, their families—strung up on a tree somewhere.”

He had a point. I wouldn’t put it past any of the Alphas to do just such a thing. Operating in the background, using threats and keeping secrets, that was their way. Until recently, they’d kept it well hidden from the general populace. We were changing that, but as Kiel said, it would take time.

“Okay,” I said, giving in to his arguments. “Fine.”

Kiel extended his hand once more, and that time, I took it. We ran for the edge of the loose jumble of fallen rocks. My eyes watched my footing, making sure I didn’t twist an ankle, but my brain was elsewhere. I tried to drag it back to the moment. It was *not* the time to become stuck in a daze trying to figure out Kiel ... Callistus ... whoever he was.

Despite arguing he could leave the persona of Callistus behind, I knew it wouldn’t be *quite* that easy. For either of us. I intended to try, but there would surely be a lot of conflicting emotion to come out of it.

“So, where do we go?” I asked as we scrambled across the mountainside, moving laterally instead of vertically. The armored guards would have a hard time keeping up with us, our naked forms lighter, more agile. But with the steepness of the mountain and the loose rock, we didn’t dare shift into our animal forms. Fingers were necessary for grip on the way down.

“Still working on that one,” Kiel said as we shuffled along a rather thin ledge, backs to the wall, a steep drop below.

Behind us, the Wulphere came relentlessly on, never slowing, their only intent to bring us in. Their Alpha was buried under tons of rock, but that apparently didn't matter to them. The mountain, with the giant *dent* in it, like a fist punched into snow, loomed above us as we went, ever watchful.

"This way," Kiel said, jumping from the ledge. "Hurry!"

My scream of panic was halted before it began as I saw the drop leveled out to no more than half a dozen feet or so. I followed him lithely, bending my knees slightly to catch myself and then taking off down a slope, our destination clearly visible.

Up ahead, the mountain was split, cleaved in half by the hammer of time and shifting landscapes until a giant gorge was revealed, running for miles on either side. Along the far side, the slope lessened enough that a forest grew, carpeting the ground from there to the base.

One of the trees, a giant *filmore*, native to my homeland of Arcadia, had fallen across the gorge, creating a bridge, the only one for miles around. Putting our heads down, we raced for it. If we could get across first, perhaps we could dislodge the tree and strand the soldiers behind us.

Kiel crossed first, leaping onto the thick trunk, the tree large enough to support two or three of him running side by side. As I approached, I gathered myself and sprang, clearing the maze of tiny branches that had been the top of the tree and landing on its trunk.

"Don't slow down!" Kiel hollered from up ahead. "It's rotten!"

Crack.

Something split, and the tree shook violently, spilling us both to our hands and knees. I gripped a nearby branch to stop myself from sliding off. Immediately, we stood and kept moving as the *filmore* tree's bark sloughed off in giant chunks under the impact of our feet.

It wouldn't last.

Kiel was halfway across the gorge when it became clear the tree was giving way.

“Run!” he hollered.

“Yep!” I shouted as the trunk bent under me, huge swaths of it cracking under our weight.

Then it began to slowly roll over. I was on my hands and knees, still moving for the far side, my heart thundering in my chest until I could all but hear its roar in my ears. Teeth clenched, I hauled myself up the ever-increasing incline of the trunk. Kiel was nearly at the top.

“Don’t wait for me, you idiot!” I shouted as he paused.

The log settled for just a moment, long enough for me to get to my feet and run for it at breakneck speed. Kiel saw that I was close and flung himself for the edge. The force of him jumping, however, dislodged the tree. With a mighty groan and snapping sound, it split in the middle, the two ends giving way.

“Jada, jump!”

I did, scrambling up the tree trunk and flinging myself toward the empty ledge next to Kiel just as it plunged into the depths below us.

It wasn’t enough. I slammed into the side of the gorge and began to slip backward, fingers scrambling to find a hold, something to stop me from tumbling back into the darkness with the dead tree.

A vise grip clamped on my forearm as Kiel grabbed me, his fingers squeezing hard enough to bruise bone.

“I’ve got you,” he said, the gentleness of his voice at odds with the strength of his clasp. He hauled me up and over the edge. Together, we collapsed into a pile, my head on his chest, both of us panting.

Wulfhere skidded to a halt on the far side of the gorge, staring balefully across the distance until one of them barked new orders that sent them running in different directions.

“Thank you,” I said, rolling over to lie on him as his arms wrapped around me, holding me tight.

In the heat of the moment, he even kissed the top of my head. I grinned but didn’t point it out. I doubted he would have done so if he was still in his “I am Callistus, you must hate me” mindset. Better to take a victory where I could. He would come to his senses soon.

I hope.

“Thank you,” Kiel replied in turn, helping me to my feet, brushing some bits of rotten wood from me and out of my hair.

“For?”

“Being willing to run and not kill them.”

“You’re welcome,” I said. “After all, who says that—”

I was cut off as the ground itself began to tremble beneath us.

“An earthquake?” I asked, spreading my feet wide. “Out here?”

“No,” Kiel said numbly, pointing behind me. Up the slope.

I turned, just in time to see the entire mountainside begin to come apart in an avalanche of stone.

Chapter Three

Shattering like glass under the stress and torture of trying to stay upright after the implosion within its heart, the rock simply came undone. Millions of tons of rock fell inward and collapsed in a roar so loud it drove us to our knees, howling in pain as it overwhelmed our ears.

Huge chunks of rock the size of small towns shuddered and heaved, slowly making their way down the slope, exploding into smaller pieces that were *only* the size of houses. A wave of rock swept outward as more and more of the mountain gave up.

And it was all coming our way.

Fingers snatched at my arm, hauling me to my feet. Kiel was there, in front of me, his mouth moving, but I couldn't hear him over the noise.

"*WHAT?*" I shouted, but he shook his head. Even a foot apart, the power of the mountain coming apart drowned out anything else.

My eyes still worked, however, and I read his lips as he mouthed one singular word at me.

Shift.

There was already fur sprouting across his body. He was right, that would be our only way out, the only hope we had for escaping the oncoming tide of destruction.

The panicked scream I sent into my mind as I opened the connection between my wolf and me was answered immediately as the she-bitch came howling through like a tornado. She, too, could see what was coming for us and wanted to get out of its way.

CRACK. We were blasted several feet in the air as the ground nearby split open, huge chunks tumbling into the gorge we'd just crossed.

Two sets of wolf eyes met, and we were off in a twitch of muscle, four furred legs propelling us each forward at a speed no human could hope to match. It was no lope or run. It was a frantic, all-out sprint for a place of safety we weren't even sure existed.

A boulder hurtled past us at deadly speed, smashing through a tree and continuing on, the boat-sized chunk of rock not even slowed by the impact. Wood shattered everywhere, spraying us with slivers that split fur and drew blood. But still, we ran on.

More boulders and rocks blasted past us as the landslide came on, an inexorable wave that wanted nothing more than to swallow up anything and everything in its way. I thrust aside a nauseous thought as more than one boulder flashed with silver, armor it had swallowed up from Lycaonus' men. The dark stains on the rocks indicated their fate and a likely promise to us.

I somehow managed to run even faster after that, extorting my shifter body to new lengths. But it wouldn't be enough. The very ground under us was beginning to split apart, the rock below crumbling, while the layer of dirt was dislodged, sliding downward.

A snarl burst from my throat, directed toward Kiel. *We aren't going to make it.*

Yes, we are. Now, run! The answering growl didn't sound as confident as he thought.

Kiel, too, knew we were doomed. There was no way we could escape the—

Something smashed into my hind legs. Losing balance, I slammed into the ground, bouncing over and rolling, the whiplash sending pain arcing through my entire spine as the boulder that had clipped me rolled past swiftly.

In a flash, Kiel was at my side.

Get up, he snarled as rocks and huge chunks of stone passed us. *Now.*

I struggled to my feet, my hind legs screaming in agony with each step.

Go. I can't make it.

My snarls were met with an icy glare. *No.*

Slowly, I picked up the pace, forcing myself to ignore how torturous each step had become. It was either pain or death. There was no in between. I *had* to run.

Trees were being uprooted as the soft soil came apart in advance of the main wave. The entire ground shifting and sliding, while beneath it, the mountain continued to collapse. It was pointless, our running, but we did it anyway because neither of us wanted to quit. If we were going to die, it would be because the damn mountain *earned* our deaths, not because we sat still and let it come. Screw that.

A boulder arced over both of us, smashing into the ground ahead, crumbling into a thousand smaller pieces, forcing us to dodge and split around it.

Down, down the mountain, we went, as fast as we could, but far too slow. I knew it. Kiel knew it. And now, the mountain had us.

Up ahead, the ground yawned open wide. One moment, it was grass and trees tumbling, and the next, just nothingness.

It swallowed us before we could even try to act.

Down. Not quite vertical. We bounced and jumped, trying to stay upright. Failing. I flipped and rolled, while a huge *filmore* tree went sailing past into the darkness.

Then I hit something hard and was flung out into a darkness that had no floor, no bottom to it. My stomach surged into my throat as I spun wildly into a darkness that had no limits, no end.

I howled in impotent rage, just another part of a waterfall of dirt, trees, and mountain.

SPLASH!

The impact of water drove the air from my lungs. The *crack-crack-crack* of rocks hitting the surface nonstop was deafening. I sank below, the current dragging me along while I paddled hard, struggling to reach air. I burst clear just long

enough to inhale once before a rock hit the water close enough to drive me under.

I spun and bounced as more chunks of stone battered my body, until the current finally swept me out of the huge hole that was rapidly filling with mountain and into the underground hollow it had long ago bored out of the solid rock. The underground river carried me along while I paddled to stay afloat, ignoring the stream of physical complaints my body was sending my way.

There was no point trying to look around, to figure out where I was or what was going on. That far underground, I couldn't see a thing. My wolf's vision was excellent, but there was quite literally *no* light at all to see with. Pure blackness. Touch, scent, and whatever sound my battered eardrums could pick up were all I had to go on.

Gravel scraped under paw. Frantically, I dug in, pushing myself upward and out of the water, step by step, until I could collapse on the shore as the river carried on past.

The rumble of the dying mountain continued behind me. Or was it above? I had no way of telling where it was coming from, but so far, it seemed I was safe. There was no sense that the ceiling was about to give way and crush me flat. And if it were, there wasn't much I could do about it anyway.

I shifted back into my human form and crawled a bit farther up onto the small shoreline.

"Kiel!" I called worriedly. I hadn't heard or seen him since we'd gone over the edge. In the rain of stone that had followed, he'd become lost. I didn't know if he was alive or buried under a rock somewhere, dead or dying and not knowing the same about me.

There was no response. I maneuvered myself into a sitting position.

"Kiel!" I hollered at the top of my lungs. "Kiel, where are you?"

There was a splash, followed by what sounded like doggy paddling as something living came closer. I tensed, waiting.

Eventually, gravel crunched and shifted as it was disturbed.

Was it him, or was it something else, some underground predator that had located its next meal and come to devour me before I even knew I was under attack?

“Kiel?” I called nervously.

“I’m here,” a familiar voice groaned, rife with pain.
“Wherever *here* is.”

Chapter Four

Gravel crunched as I moved toward Kiel, feeling my way unsteadily on hands and knees in the utter darkness. Only his breathing and the slight splashing of water gave me direction.

I recoiled at the first touch of warm flesh, the difference in temperature a mild shock. It didn't last long, though. The touch of another person, of *Kiel*, was a sudden craving that wouldn't be satisfied unless I flung myself at him. So, I did, wrapping my arms and legs around his body, holding on for dear life, afraid that if I let go, I would be forever alone in the pitch-black cavern.

"Hey," he said gently, holding himself upright on his knees and wrapping both arms around me as I clung to him like some sort of spider-monkey. "It's okay, Jada. It's okay."

"I know," I said, clutching him tighter.

He stroked the back of my head, fingers smoothing out my wet hair, whispering sweet nothings into my ear. Slowly, I relaxed, the burst of terror slowly fading as my heart returned to a normal rhythm.

"Better," he murmured into one ear before catching my chin and tilting my head upward to kiss me. He took his time, slow and thorough, parting my lips with his tongue, both of us exploring the other. *That* was something we knew, something we could touch and feel, that we had experienced before. It was safe in a way, keeping us grounded in the moment.

"All right," I said, uncurling my legs from around his waist as he stood, reaching carefully overhead to ensure there was clearance. "I'm a little less panicked now."

"Good," he said, then paused for a moment. "Though, I don't understand how you aren't madder at me for hiding who I am. You should be furious with me."

I licked my lips. "I am mad," I admitted. "But not because of who you were born as, Kiel. But because you lied. You hid yourself. I also know *why* you did it. The anger is there, at the

trickery, but I'm not letting it control my thoughts or how I act. Sometimes, logic and emotion, they butt heads."

He snorted. "True enough."

"We'll work through this," I assured him.

"First, we should probably try to solve our current predicament," he said, the gruffness of his tone hiding his emotion.

Always the tough guy, that was Kiel. I pressed my forehead to his pec for a brief moment, then pulled away. After all, he had a point.

"Might not be such a bad idea," I agreed.

"Just need to find a way out of here," he said, turning, looking back at the water, I presumed, since I couldn't see.

"Is *here* where I think it is?" I asked, shifting uncomfortably.

"Do you know where we are?" he asked sharply. "You've been here?"

"What? No, not at all. I just meant, we're *under* Mount Triumph, aren't we?"

"Probably," Kiel conceded with a heavy sigh.

I wasn't ready for the bone-deep terror that came bubbling up at his admission, and for a moment, I clung to him tighter, taking what comfort I could in the fact that I wasn't alone. We were together. Which just meant we would both die, trapped under the mountain.

"We're not going to die down here," Kiel growled, grabbing my hands and holding them still. "Do you understand me, Jada? It won't happen. I swear it."

I wanted to ask him how he could be so sure about it, but the words wouldn't come. My mind didn't want to hear his explanation because it knew how flimsy it would sound. I wanted to believe him. To believe there was hope.

"Come on, let's explore, see where we are," he said, sticking a hand out in front of him and feeling around before

shuffling forward.

At first, he was forced to drag me along as my brain was frozen with panic. The farther we got from the gravel banks of the water, however, the more I started to get a handle on my mind. Soon, my hand was entwined with his as we felt our way forward together, using our feet to ensure there was ground and then our hands to make sure we didn't hit anything.

Such as the wall my fingers just scraped against.

"Wall," I said, coming to a halt. "I'm touching wall. Rock. Fairly smooth."

"Me, too," Kiel grunted. "Is this the end?"

We slid forward another step. The walls narrowed slightly, but they never stopped.

"It's a cave, a tunnel," I said as we entered it, the opening wide enough for us to walk side by side—barely.

We continued our shuffle slide. Time passed. It could have been five minutes or three hours. I didn't know.

The sound of metal on metal brought us to an immediate halt. There was no mistaking the *clink*.

"Please tell me that was you," I whispered, "because I didn't touch anything."

"Something on the wall," he said. "I need to let go for a moment."

I panicked, an instinctual response. However, just as swiftly as it came, I grabbed the spike of fear and shoved it away, driving it into submission. If there were metal down there, it meant *people* had been there. Which meant there was a way in and a way out.

"Okay," I said, my voice catching.

"Just for a moment," he assured me, then dropped my hand. There was more clanking of metal as he explored whatever he was touching.

"What is it?"

There was an odd *scratch* sound, like rock against rock. Kiel grunted, his only response, then the noise came again, followed by a brilliant light.

I cried out in surprise, turning away, shielding my eyes against the savage miniature sun that burned to stare at.

“What *is* that thing?” I snapped, seeing the light through my eyelids. “It’s so bright.”

“It’s just a sparker,” he said. “Look. It’s a wall torch.”

Slowly, I peeled my eyes open, forced to leave them at tiny slits. But he was right. It was a torch, a piece of cloth tied around the end of a wooden stick. The rag was bone dry and burning fast, but it was *light*. We could *see!*

“Come on,” Kiel said, gesturing for me to give him my hand. “Let’s explore. We’ll need to find others before this one goes out.”

I followed him as we went down the hall, collecting other torches until I held a half-dozen under one arm, all just as dry as the first.

Then, without warning, the tunnel ended, opening up into a huge chamber. Larger torches dotted the walls and outlined several pathways forward. Kiel lit them as we went, and the light built, easing much of the tension fraying my nerves. I’d never been afraid of the dark before. But that had only been *night*. What we’d experienced was different.

I exhaled heavily as we slowly made our way forward.

“What *is* this place?” Kiel muttered.

The walls were too smooth to be anything natural, and they rose up until the darkness reclaimed them. Below our feet, the floor was carved into square tiles, each one etched with wild lines that didn’t seem to have any rhyme or reason. Torches were embedded every few feet on either side of the walkway running up the center of the room, leading us toward ... something.

“Uh, this kind of looks like a—”

“Temple,” Kiel finished, our minds in sync.

“Yeah.”

He shone the light around, revealing carvings of some wolves on the walls. The beasts were bowed down before a woman.

“It’s a temple to Fate,” he murmured. “But *old*. Very old. I don’t recall ever hearing about anything like this. It was old when we built the new temple. Long forgotten even then, I think.”

Wind whipped through the temple, extinguishing every torch at the same time before continuing past us, leaving nothing but the smell of smoke and ash in its wake.

“Please tell me that was a coincidence,” I said, licking suddenly dry lips.

“I don’t think so,” Kiel said. “Look over there. Light.”

I didn’t have to remind him that I couldn’t see. Because I *could*. Everything in the temple had taken on a sickly green hue to it. The light was faint, but with my enhanced vision, I could still see. Including the wavering, eerie green light in the distance, up a set of stairs.

“Well, crap. You want to take us toward the creepy green light source, don’t you?”

Kiel nodded. “Yes. I think it’s waiting for us.”

“Creepy glowing things are always a *baaadd* idea,” I warned. “We should probably go back the way we came.”

“Fate is calling,” Kiel rumbled, taking a step forward toward the light.

He thought the light was Fate? It did have a similar hue, but ...

“Hey, wait!” I called, hurrying after Kiel, who’d already started walking.

I caught up with him just as he went up the carved rock. At the top, the light source was in the center of the circular room, a globe of energy. Just spinning. Doing nothing.

“What now?” I asked as we stood at the perimeter of the room.

“I don’t know,” Kiel said, his face pinched.

He took a step forward into the room.

Immediately, the light source increased in intensity, flaring into a brilliance that had both of us shielding our eyes.

When it dimmed, we were no longer alone.

Chapter Five

“Fate?” I gasped, taking in the glittering there-but-not-there woman in front of us. “Is that you?”

She looked nothing like the woman I’d seen in my mind. That woman had been tall, straight of spine, and, not proud, but blessed with endless confidence. A perfect version of what I imagined a goddess might look like if she let us mortals look upon her. In front of us now was a haggard street urchin.

Black hair fell in tangles around her shoulders, the unkempt locks knotted and lacking any luster or shine. Like the owner, it was half-dead. Fate herself, if that was indeed who the apparition was, looked worse. Her eyes were sunk deep into her face, the gaunt, pale look only offset by the greenish glow emanating from within and about her.

The bags under her eyes were enough for a family of four to go on vacation with, and each eye was bloodshot to hell and back. Her clothing, a simple white gown, was dirty and soiled, ripped and torn. It revealed the multitude of bruises and scrapes underneath the mud-stained garment, a shocking collection of injuries, topped off by a left arm hanging at an unnatural angle.

“*This* is Fate?” Kiel choked out, just as taken aback as I was by her appearance.

“I think so,” I murmured as if the goddess somehow wouldn’t be able to hear me in her own temple.

“Hello, Jada,” she said.

I stiffened. I might not recognize the image in front of me, but I could *never* forget that voice.

“Fate,” I said, bowing my head respectfully. “That *is* who you are, right?”

“Yes.” There was a slightly airy, almost ethereal, quality to her voice that I hadn’t heard when she was in my head. “That is a name I have been referred to.”

“What *is* this place?” I asked, taking the lead, due to my “familiarity” with the goddess, bred out of us occupying my mind together for weeks on end. “Where are we? Are we under Mount Triumph? We are, aren’t we?”

I clamped my mouth shut at a glance from Kiel. His point was clear. Shut up and ask one question at a time. Running on like a child wasn’t appropriate when talking to a *goddess*. He might have had a point.

“We are deep under Mount Triumph,” Fate said. She even *sounded* tired. “This is the first temple that was ever dedicated to me.”

“The first?” Kiel echoed, looking around once again, taking it all in.

“This is where I was ... made? Born? Neither word is accurate, but they will have to suffice,” Fate said. “The worshippers believed in me, and so, eventually, *I was*.”

“Wow,” I whispered. Just how old *was* the temple? Kiel had said there was no knowledge of it from his time, which meant it was *at least* seven centuries old. But it had to be old enough to be forgotten by then. So, how much longer? A thousand years? More? The ancientness of the temple weighed in me as it sank in. Our ancestors’ ancestors had come here and worshipped. Maybe some of *my* ancestors had knelt there in that very spot.

“Why are we here?” Kiel said, breaking the silence that had followed. “It’s no coincidence that we ended up here, is it?”

Fate was silent, but her head slowly swung toward him. Though he didn’t flinch under her gaze, his body went rigid. I could understand why. Centuries ago, he’d been one of the nine who’d helped bind her. Her weakness was, in her eyes, partially *his* fault. I could only hope she would see that he’d worked a long time to undo his mistake.

“It is not,” she agreed. “I need your help.”

“You need *our* help? I find that hard to believe,” I said softly. “You’re a goddess.”

Fate laughed, a soft tinkling thing. “Do I *look* like much of a goddess to you right now, Jada? I am *part* of one. A sliver.”

“The part that was inside me,” I guessed. “From Arcadus’ Fate Stone.”

The wretched image of the goddess nodded slowly. “Yes. I am but one piece of a whole, and I must be reunited with the others.”

“And you want *us* to do it,” I said, feeling a bit irked.

Fate nodded.

I glanced at Kiel. “You’ve been inside my head. You know it’s our intention to do that already. So, why put us through this whole ordeal just to ask us to do something we’ve already been intending to do?”

“That’s a big ask, anyway,” Kiel said. “Wanting us to destroy all the remaining stones. There’s no guarantee we don’t die in the process. Then, where will you be?”

“You must try,” Fate said, speaking over both of our objections. “Time is no longer on our side.”

“How so?” I asked, looking at Kiel. “We’re going to need time. All of the remaining Alphas, they’ll be on guard for an attack as soon as word reaches them about Arcadus. In fact, most probably know already. Any attack now would be suicide for us. Unless you’re going to come along for the ride again.”

I said the last part rather hesitantly. There were benefits to Fate living in my body. Immortality, increased stamina, strength, and much more. But at the same time, her power had quite literally been ripping me apart from the inside.

“No,” she answered. “I must stay here. Now that I am back in the world, this temple is my limits. I am my most powerful here and can protect myself from any further attempts to be bound.”

She didn’t *quite* look at Kiel when she said it, but in the corner of my eyes, his face went flat.

“You still haven’t answered how time is running out,” I pointed out. “We should have some time. Lycaonus is buried

under half a mountain. It'll take his men a long time to dig him out and find him in all that."

"Days," Fate whispered, the sound carrying throughout the temple. "He will be free in days at most. When he is free, he will summon the other Alphas to his side."

"And?" I pressed. "You're holding something back. Just say it."

"The other pieces of my being are currently bound to the stones. Stones that were made in the heart of the Great Forge of Nycitum," Fate explained.

"Yes. We knew they had to be special," I said. "Which is why the sword I bound you to exploded soon after it was created, right?"

"True," Fate agreed. "But that is the problem."

I frowned.

Fate sighed. "Although the other pieces of me are locked away, we are still one of the whole. I cannot control them, but that doesn't mean we can't ... *communicate*, in a way. Lycaonus is linked to his. I have seen his mind, his plans."

A shiver ran down my spine, lifting goosebumps across my flesh. The ominous feeling didn't dissipate. Instead, it grew.

"Lycaonus will return to Nycitum," Fate said. "And there, he will forge a new vessel for his shard."

Realization hit like a horse. "He's going to make swords instead," I whispered. "Swords that are *meant* to hold you."

The ghostly goddess apparition nodded slowly, fear clouding her sunken eye sockets. "Yes. That is his plan."

"My god," Kiel whispered. "He'll be unstoppable. They all will be. Weapons of Fate."

The image shuddered *violently*, prompting us to take a half step back.

"You *must not let this happen*," Fate said. "Look what happened to me after mere seconds as a weapon. If they do this, I will become something twisted, something dark. I will

become wicked in every sense, and the fallout will be unstoppable. You *must* stop him. Please.”

It was beyond unsettling to have a goddess beg for our help. My stomach churned violently, to the point I worried I would be sick in front of her. I didn't want to find out how a god would take me vomiting all over the very temple that saw their creation. There was no way it would be good.

Kiel glanced at me. I licked my lips. He was waiting for my decision.

“Of course,” I said. “We'll try.”

What else were we supposed to do? If a goddess needed help to stop a madman from destroying all that was good, how could anyone say no? Even if I was so scared that I wanted to pee myself.

“We're not much good down here,” Kiel muttered. “How do we get back to the surface?”

Emerald light poured from Fate in a blinding display. “Here at the heart of my creation, I hold more power. Go. Stop him before he brings darkness to all.”

The goddess wrapped us in a globe of light that shone with the brightness of the sun.

I tried to shield myself from it, but it was useless. The light was blinding. And it wasn't fading.

Because it *was* sunlight.

Chapter Six

I glanced around. At some point, Fate had transported us out of her underground cave to the surface.

“Now, where are we?” I asked, staring at the mountains on the far side of the river. “I don’t recognize this land. You’re more traveled than I. Where the hell did she send us?”

The flat land extended away from us, a wind-blasted wasteland to the east and north and forests to the southeast. River and mountains were to the west of us. Lots of land. No signs of civilization. No boat traffic or nearby towns. Just emptiness.

“Not sure,” Kiel muttered.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, going to his side. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” he said, pulling his hand out of my grip, avoiding my touch entirely.

I searched his face, wanting to reach out, to touch him, to hold his hand, perhaps become enfolded in a hug, but the stony hardness of his features warned me off.

“Why?” I asked, chewing on the inside my cheek. He was trying to push me away again. But hadn’t we worked through that? I’d told him it didn’t matter, that I knew better. So, why was he suddenly acting distant again?

“I’m sorry,” he said gruffly, shaking his head and staring out into the wastelands at something only he could see. “I just can’t, Jada.”

“The least you can do is tell me *why* not,” I said, putting some steel into my voice.

“Because I don’t deserve it,” he replied, closing his eyes.

“Kiel ...”

“That was *her*,” he said, cutting me off. “That was the goddess herself. The one who I helped bind and more. This

armageddon hanging over our heads? That's on me. I see it all now."

So did I. Kiel *had* accepted my answers. Until he'd come face to face with the source of his guilt. Of the person, if a goddess could be called such, that he'd wronged.

"You're righting those wrongs," I said. "You've been fighting for centuries to do that. She can see that, Kiel."

"I know," he whispered. "But that figure down there, the state she's in, is *my fault*. How can I let myself enjoy life when she's like that? How can I possibly let myself come to care for someone else, to let myself—"

He broke off midsentence. Had he been about to say what I thought he was? Was it possible? I bit my lip, thrown for a loop by his near admission. Could it be that he *did* feel that way about me but was just so unwilling to admit it because of his own guilt that he felt he wasn't allowed to find happiness? That would be a very Kiel thing.

"Kiel—" I began.

"My name is Callistus," he growled, cutting me off, something that was beginning to irk me. He said it as if it were a statement, as if he could somehow convince me to think ill of him by force.

"Is that what you want?" I snapped, shoving him with both hands, hard.

He staggered back a step, the physical confrontation unexpected.

"Do you want me to hate you? Is there nothing more you want than to wallow in your own grief and pity about something that happened centuries ago? Something you've been fighting for all of those years to undo?" I stepped forward, challenging him. "Well, is it? Hmm?"

He wouldn't meet my eyes, still staring out across the empty wasteland. "Maybe," he said softly at last. "Maybe when it's all over, we can revisit this. Revisit ... *us*."

“So, that’s it?” I asked stonily, crossing my arms over my chest. “You’re just ending it?”

“Did it ever really begin?” he countered, a sliver of anger making it through his walls.

But anger at whom? Was it directed at me for continually pushing, for not giving up and walking away? Or at himself for being so unwilling and unable to forgive himself?

He continued without stopping, pushing me back a step without actually touching me or even moving. “We never went on dates. I never courted you. We just ...”

“*Had an attraction,*” I finished for him. “We were pulled to one another. We *are* pulled to one another, dammit. Just because you’re trying to deny it doesn’t mean you don’t feel it either. Right here!”

I slammed a finger into his chest over his heart. “If you didn’t, if you were empty there, then this wouldn’t be bothering you. You wouldn’t be worked up over it, wouldn’t be hurt by it all. So, don’t fucking lie to me, Kiel, because you’re really fucking bad at it, okay. I don’t know what it is that we have between us any more than you do. It scares me, too. But I’m not running from it.”

Silence passed, a full minute or more before he said anything.

“I’m not running either,” he said. “I just can’t afford to. Not now. Not when we’re so close, after all this time, to finally undoing it.”

I frowned. “That makes no sense.”

“It makes *all* the sense,” he growled. “If you’re me. If you’ve lived for as long as I have and listened to the stories told about yourself. Stories that everyone now believes.”

“What are you talking about?”

He sighed. “Jada, whether or not you accept it, I *am* Callistus. And if we succeed, *when* we succeed, that truth will come out. People will know. There will be no more hiding under an alias, no more pretending to be someone I’m not.

Those other people who will know the truth about me? They won't be like you. They won't be willing to give me a second chance. They won't be able to reconcile the truth. You can't be seen with me when that happens. I won't *allow* them to treat you the way they've treated me. I'm doing this to *protect you* from them. Because they will come for me. And if they hurt you, I will never forgive myself."

I licked my lips, trying to come up with a retort, a rebuttal, *something* to counter his point.

"It's too ingrained," he said softly. "Even your children's rhymes vilify me."

Then he began to hum a tune I never wanted to hear again in my life.

Calli-catch.

Calli-catch.

"Stop."

Can't. See. Me.

"Kiel. Stop," I said, shaking my head, trying to forget, to tune it out. I didn't want to go back there. To relive those memories.

"*Calli-Catch. Calli-catch,*" he started to sing out loud.

"Enough," I growled. The cold chill I was feeling was fake. But it was too similar. A river. Someone I cared for deeply. That same damn song.

"Now. I'm. Free!"

I snarled and shoved him in the chest. "Well, if you wanted to push me away, you're doing a damn good job of it!" I shouted in his face, turning to storm away. "Ass!"

Chapter Seven

I walked off without saying another word. Embarrassment and anger mixed in equal parts. Picking up a rock, I flung it across the surface of the slow-moving river with enough force to skip it several times before it plunged into the water. Not satisfied, I picked up a larger rock and tossed it out, aiming to make as big of a splash as I could.

Steam still not blown off, I continued down the river, following the path the water had carved over generations.

“Fuck,” I growled eventually, coming to a stop shortly after.

I would have to go back there and apologize for making a scene. He didn’t sing that song to intentionally provoke me.

A frown lowered my eyebrows as I thought about that. *Had* he known what singing that damn song would do? My mother was one of them. Kiel knew her. Which meant there was actually a strong chance he *did* know the truth about Lanna’s death and that song. So, maybe he *had* been trying to provoke me ...

“Hi.”

I stiffened. In the middle of my mental conversation, Kiel had come after me, and I hadn’t heard him approaching.

“Hello.” I didn’t look up at him, didn’t apologize.

He did.

“I’m sorry,” Kiel said softly, without any falsehood. He was being genuine, which only made me feel like more of an ass.

Sighing, I stopped studying the bed of rocks underfoot and looked at him, meeting his pale blue gaze with as much spine as I had. “Me, too,” I said. “I shouldn’t have stormed off like that.”

“I didn’t mean to offend you,” Kiel said, licking his lips. Why was he nervous? “It’s just, I, well, I never thought anyone else out there would be as hurt as I am by that song.”

“Anyone *else*?” I echoed without thinking.

Kiel just stared at me until my mind made the mental connection between the context of the song—about them being backstabbers and hiding in the dark until the forces of “good” caught up to them and sent them running.

“Right, sorry,” I said, shaking my head. “It’s not the song itself for me. But the memory that comes with it.”

I bit my tongue, trying to distract myself from the pain boiling to the surface. I couldn’t even *talk* about it without wanting to shed tears. Would that ever fade? It had been over a decade. Why did the pain always seem so fresh whenever I talked about her?

“What do you mean?” Kiel asked quietly, leaning forward.

I could see him fighting not to take another step toward me, doing his best to keep a respectful distance. His leg even twitched as it held itself back from taking a step. He *wanted* to be near me. But his incredibly strong willpower kept him back from giving in. Part of me wished he would. I could use a Kiel hug right about then.

“You know about my sister? Lanna?” I said, forcing myself to speak her name, even if it made my tongue thick with grief.

I missed her so much. If she were still alive, I knew she would be right there with me, fighting against the Alphas.

Kiel nodded. “I know she died. That a lot of people blamed you. That *you* blame you. But you were young and on the ice of the river. Accidents happen, Jada.”

“It wasn’t an accident,” I growled. “I was on the ice, and I was singing that stupid song. I wouldn’t come back until I finished it. I didn’t listen to her or my mom, who told us not to go out too far. I just *had* to sing it, do the whole routine. And as I did, the ice cracked. Lanna came out and saved me, but that meant she went under when the ice split. All because of that song.”

Kiel nodded. “I understand. It’s still not your fault, Jada. You didn’t mean to. It was an accident.”

I didn't respond. There was no point. I would never forgive myself for her death. Nobody could convince me of that.

We both stared out at the sun as it slowly sank in the sky. Eventually, it would sink below the mountains and out of sight, though that was hours away still. But for the moment, we enjoyed the peace of it in silence.

"I hate it because of what it did to my people."

We'd been quiet for so long that his voice startled me.

"They were vilified by it, turned into the worst things imaginable and stuffed into a children's rhyme. Demons and child-killers, my people are now the bogeymen of an entire culture," he said, his voice raw and ragged with pain.

"Kiel," I half-moaned in sympathy. I'd never considered it like that before. About Kiel, yes, but I'd never made the jump to his people. His entire clan.

"Not to me." He shook his head. "To me, they were the bravest of all. They chose, they *chose*, to sacrifice everything they had to join me in resisting. To take a stand and fight back against the monsters the Alphas had become. Every single one of them. They all sided with me against the darkness."

"I can't imagine," I whispered.

"And what did they get in return for such courage?" he spat. "Death and a song that turned every single shifter against them. Spitting on their memories, dancing on their graves. That's what."

Against my judgment, I reached out and laid a hand on his bicep. He didn't want to let himself grow closer to me, and I steeled myself for rejection, but I couldn't just stand there and not do anything. The pain radiating off him was too palpable to ignore. It seemed impossible for him to shoulder that burden for so long on his own.

"You know what I hate the most?" he asked, glancing at me, his eyes shining with tears.

"What's that?" I managed to get out in a hoarse whisper.

“Knowing that none of them will ever have their deeds remembered. Nobody will ever write songs about them. No praises to the glory of heroic last stands, delaying the enemy so that the wounded and young could escape. No songs sung about gallant charges into the face of a superior enemy and *winning*,” he snarled, clenching a fist, a tear finally falling free. “The things I saw, Jada. The things they *did* should be on everyone’s lips. Even now, centuries later, *they* are the people who should be looked up to. Because they sacrificed it all.”

I was crying now, too.

“Libraries. I could fill *libraries* worth of their exploits. But nobody will ever know,” he said in a low voice, almost groaning in pain. He toed at the river’s edge, taking a few small steps into it until the water ran around his ankles.

Tears flowed freely down his face as he stared at the mountains, looking into the fog of memory, seeing things that only he remembered, that only he knew had occurred. I couldn’t join him. I could only be there to support him. The guilt and pain that had bowed his shoulders for all that time came crashing free. He let it shine. In front of me.

I wanted to reach out with more than just a hand. I wanted to open my mouth, to tell him that their time was coming nearer by the day. Once we stopped Lycaonus and the other Alphas and shattered their Fate stones, then things would change. He could take the time to write the stories of his clan, of the Callis and their true nature. It would take time, but people would come around. They would see the truth.

And wrongs would be made right.

But I didn’t. I couldn’t. My mouth wouldn’t work. It wouldn’t let me give him those assurances.

It was too busy listening to my feet.

“Jada?” Kiel was frowning at me, his tears gone, though the streaks down his face were there, proof of the moment. Not that I needed it.

“Shhh,” I said, crouching as I pressed my hands to the ground, not trusting my bare feet alone.

“What is it?” Kiel whispered.

“The ground,” I said, looking up at him.

“What about it?” he asked from where he stood, his feet still in the river. Which explained why he hadn’t sensed it yet.

“You told me to listen to it,” I replied, standing up and looking around. “And it’s telling me that we’re about to have company. A lot of company.”

Kiel splashed his way back to me until we stood shoulder to shoulder on the edge of the river, staring at the trees and the tundra, waiting for whatever was about to show itself.

Chapter Eight

“There’s no way Lycaonus’ men have found us,” I muttered over my shoulder. “It can’t be, can it?”

“No,” Kiel said tightly.

I frowned at something in his voice. “You don’t sound curious.”

His reply was a wordless grunt.

“You know what’s coming, don’t you?” I asked, facing him to better see the look on his face. “Don’t you?”

“I have a guess.”

Whatever it was, he certainly didn’t look happy about it.

“Care to share with the rest of the class?”

Our unexpected company was close enough now that we could *see* the ground shaking, little pebbles vibrating as they drew nearer.

“Look at the river,” Kiel said. “Where are the mountains?”

I glanced to the side. “On the other side of it?”

“And the sun is setting *behind* the mountains, isn’t it?”

“Yeah ...” I frowned, putting two and two together. “Shit. We’re on the *eastern* side of the mountains, aren’t we?”

“And on the eastern side of the river,” he added.

I swallowed, my throat turning abruptly dry as I processed what he meant. We were outside the Canis Empire.

“The Wildlands,” I whispered fearfully, mouth dry, heart suddenly racing, a roaring sound in my ears to match the oncoming thunder of whatever lay just out of sight.

The northern and eastern borders of the empire were ringed by mountain ranges. Beyond them was the river that marked the end of Canis territory. Everyone knew that. It was taught in class growing up, a border that had been secured long ago by the Alphas. Our “protectors” who’d fought long and hard with

the creatures of the Wildlands to secure the safety of the empire's citizens.

“What’s really out here?” I asked. “Are the stories true? Feral shifters and such?”

“Yes.”

“Shouldn’t we, you know, run for the river? If we can cross it ...”

Kiel snorted. “Out here, the river is just an obstacle. These people respect courage and bravery. Their entire culture is based on fighting and warfare, constant raiding. They don’t care about the river. It’s a symbolic thing. Nothing will happen if they follow us across it.”

“Oh.” Another lie by the Alphas.

“So, what should we—”

The forest shook, and then branches bowed outward as creatures boiled out. Four-legged beasts with hooves that smashed stones and trampled grasses as they swiftly and efficiently encircled us.

“What are you staring at?” the biggest one snarled as I stared in a mixture of awe and abject terror, hoping I wasn’t pissing myself from the fear.

The centaur, for that was what the thing was, trotted forward until the beast could lower his face to my level, revealing dirty teeth as he sneered at me, a perfect match for his untamed beard and hair, each full of bits of the forest that had become stuck in it.

“Are you scared, little pup?” he spat.

I glanced at Kiel, unsure of what to do. He shrugged and inclined his head slightly.

Their entire culture is based on fighting. They respect courage and bravery.

So, taking that into account, I acted in my own best interest.

I threw the biggest, hardest uppercut I could muster, driving my fist right into his jaw. Teeth snapped shut, and the big

creature staggered backward, his eyes glossing over.

“Oh, fuck,” I whimpered meekly as he recovered, thinking I was about to get trampled to death by a four-legged freak.

“Nice one,” Kiel said under his breath.

“I just got us killed, didn’t I?” I replied equally quietly.

The centaur’s eyes narrowed, while around us his peers watched. Many of them, I noted, were of different races. There were even a couple of wolves present.

All of them for the two of us? It seemed like overkill. Not to mention the speed with which they’d assembled and arrived. Something else was going on ...

“Ha!” the centaur crowed abruptly, the noise startling me into taking a step backward. “The little pup has a big spirit! Very good!”

The others, who were still assembled in an ominous circle around us, all relaxed and chuckled. They didn’t, however, lower their weapons. We were very much their prisoners. That was clear.

“Tell me, little pup,” the same centaur—he had to be their leader—asked, his tone lighter but still demanding obedience. “What brings you to our side of the river? It’s rare that those who don’t have the scent of steel on them come to visit.”

I eyed the swords and spear tips dotted throughout the grouping of nearly fifty people. What did he mean by the scent of steel? They had it in their weapons, so it wasn’t like they were against it. Though I did note a few had absolutely none on them. Clearly, they meant steel in much larger amounts.

Such as armor. Like that worn by the Wulfhere. Of course, he thought we were spies, not soldiers.

“We got lost,” I said, paraphrasing the truth in hopes I could convince him. “We were exploring an underground cave system when everything started shaking.”

The centaur’s thick, meaty features narrowed swiftly. “There’s an underground cave system that links both sides of the river?”

“Not anymore,” I said. “We barely made it out before it all came down with the rest of the mountain.”

The centaur looked to the west. I could see Mount Triumph, but it wasn't the nearest mountain to us. Even at this range, however, it was easy to see that half of it was basically *gone*.

“Yes, the collapsing mountain,” the centaur said thoughtfully, betraying a wicked intelligence in his brown eyes. “We saw that. Wondered what happened to it. That is why we're here.”

“Have you found out?” I asked, feigning ignorance.

The centaur snorted. “I expected you would tell us.”

“We weren't there,” I pointed out. “We were underground.”

“You're lying,” the centaur said bluntly, raising a hand to forestall any protest. “Don't bother denying it. We both know you were there. I don't believe in coincidences such as that.”

I stared back at him, not admitting to anything. If they didn't know, then information would be something they would value. By keeping my mouth shut, perhaps I could increase their desire to keep us alive.

“Very well, little pup,” the centaur said. “If you enjoy silence so much, then you can do so from the comfort of our custody. Perhaps once the prince decides what to do with you, you'll decide it's in your better interest to tell us what happened on that mountain of yours. But be warned, we do not tolerate spies.”

“We're not spies,” I said, staring him down as best as I could. It was hard when he topped me by several feet and several hundred pounds, but I gave it my best.

The centaur tilted his head. “Strange. I believe that to be the truth. Yet it does not explain why you're here on our lands and not your own. Some time in a jail cell will certainly jog your memory. I'm sure of that.”

I tensed, glancing at Kiel. If what Fate had said was true, we didn't have time to waste. We had to get moving to stop

Lycaonus from assembling the Alphas and locking their shards of Fate away in swords.

But Kiel just shook his head and stepped forward, indicating that we would come peacefully, with no need for a fight or worse.

The centaur noticed all that and chuckled darkly. “Yes, I thought there was more to your presence than a simple case of being lost. Come. It’s time to move.”

A cordon of swords and spears closed in tight.

“I guess we’re going with them,” I said to Kiel.

Hopefully, Lycaonus was buried nice and deep. Because it seemed we would need all the time we could get.

Chapter Nine

“There are wolves out here,” I said to Kiel as we walked side by side in the middle of our escort. The two-legged members of the group kept close to us, while those with four, such as the centaurs and the wolf shifters, ranged far and wide, scouting ahead and providing flank protection as we crossed the plains.

“Yes,” he said bluntly.

“Why does nobody ever talk about that?” I asked. “I thought the only ones to leave the Canis Empire were the traders. But they seem to live here. Long enough to have become trusted.”

Kiel shrugged. “There have always been wolves living in the wild tribes,” he said. “Even since the days before, though it was more frequent then. It’s nothing new.”

“Oh.” I wasn’t sure why I was so disappointed about that simple explanation. Had I expected some sort of grand conspiracy, perhaps? Who knew.

“How far is your prince?” I asked one of the nearby guards, a tall, silent type. With slender features and a wicked tilt to his eyes, he appeared perpetually furious.

“None of your business,” he hissed back, barely taking the time to look at me.

I leaned away at the fury boiling off him. “What the hell did I do to you? Sheesh. I’ve never met you before.”

“You follow *them*,” the creature spat. “And anyone who follows those murderers has the same blood on their hands.”

I glanced at Kiel. “Him? What’d he do?”

The elfin creature—he had no steel or metal on him whatsoever, which had me wondering if he was part, or perhaps even full, Fae—looked at me narrowly, part of his face scrunching up in scrutiny as if he couldn’t decide if I was too stupid to answer or messing with him.

“Your leaders. The Alphas. The Death Tyrants, as we call them out here.”

I almost told him that we *don't* follow them, but Kiel's hand on my shoulder stopped me.

"We're almost there," he said, pointing ahead as the ground fell away before us to reveal our destination.

I wasn't sure *what* I was expecting, but the simple and clean city of stone was not it. The buildings were squat and mostly square and rectangular, structures built for simplicity and not style, quite the opposite of the grand, soaring spires and towers in the larger cities in the empire.

Making a mental note not to associate "wild" with "uncivilized," I started taking in everything I could about the city, and it most definitely was not a *town*. Given the size of it, I had to guess over twenty thousand people lived within it. Not to mention, the permanence of the structures. Wooden buildings lived on the outskirts, but only there. As the city grew, they were replaced by more permanent stone.

And it was clean. The stone was *white*, and it showed. Dirt didn't clog the roads and alleys. I tried to reconcile it with the filthy centaur leading our group but couldn't. Perhaps that was where my misconception had come from. I'd expected a collection of huts. But it wasn't like that at all.

"Are there more cities like this?" I asked Kiel. "Outside the empire, I mean?"

"Yes. Some are bigger. Some are smaller. There are a great many people who don't live under the umbrella of the Alphas."

"I ..." I stopped speaking, choosing silence instead of revealing to all around just how naive I'd been. Even after months of working and fighting alongside the rebellion and discovering how evil the Alphas were, I was still blind to so much. Our empire had always been talked about as this grand beacon of civilization, something that the rest of the world would never achieve. As if we were the only ones with culture and the ability to work together.

Now, that was all being torn down as I realized our borders were not just to keep others out. They were to keep us *in* and

ensure the populace was blind to how *big* it was outside. And how everyone got along without an immortal ruler to “show them the way.”

We walked through the streets of the city until we arrived at a building that, by nature of having three stories instead of one or two, was the biggest around. A stone fence surrounded the property, and the gates were made of wood. The only metal in sight was what bound the gates together. Even then, several of our guards would only walk straight through the center.

The centaurs left us as we arrived, trotting off to somewhere else outside. Inside the building, we were led down a long hallway. Halfway down, a pair of servants met us with folded clothing in hand for us to put on. After donning the robes, we continued, following the guards into the throne room.

The big, spacious room with its angled ceilings was filled with the roaring crackle of a giant fire from off to the left. Paintings hung from the walls, while giant candles filled a dozen chandeliers to provide light that was accentuated through a large glass window set high in the far wall.

A multitude of tables and benches filled the room, with all manner of beings seated at them, eating and drinking and conversing. Eyes flicked toward us, but most seemed to not care.

“Well, well, well, what do we have here?” a voice boomed from the far end, capturing our attention.

I stared openly as a humungous figure rose from a chair that would have sat six or seven Kiels. The creature was taller than him, too, but the vastness of his size was centered in his gut. “A treat from the tyrants, you say? Spies trying to cross the border?”

A rustle ran through the room as those at nearby tables and benches voiced their displeasure.

“Not spies, your lordship,” Kiel said, stepping forward and ignoring the spears and swords that swung his way. “Not enemies, either. Not to you or these people, at least.”

I frowned. What was Kiel getting at?

“No?” the great beast of a creature, who I realized was the prince, asked. I had no idea what he was, but with two upthrust tusks and a mane of thick black hair that fell to his waist, he certainly was ... impressive, in a way. “Who do you claim as your enemies, then?”

“The Death Tyrants,” Kiel said bluntly, surprising me yet again with his honesty.

“Really?” The pair of dark, beady eyes narrowed thoughtfully as the prince sat down, leaning hard on his right elbow as he stared at both of us. “Is that so?”

“Yes,” Kiel said. “The seven of them are our sworn enemies, and we won’t rest until they’re dead.”

The creature stared, then began to chuckle. “Unwise, it is, to make enemies based on false information.” His dark laughter was so deep I could feel its vibrations on my skin.

Kiel snarled loud enough to draw the room into silence. “None of what I have said is false, and I do not appreciate my honor being impugned as such.”

CRACK!

The creature’s fist came down on the arm of his throne so hard the wood snapped. Fires of billowing fury awoke in the depths of his eyes, and the jolly giant persona was washed away as the prince revealed his true self.

“You accuse me of lying?”

“You started it,” Kiel pointed out icily. “Show me where I have stated a falsehood.”

“Come now, wolf,” the prince said, spreading one sausage-fingered hand wide. “It is widely known to all that there are *eight* of the bastards.”

Kiel smiled evilly, so dark and nasty was the look on his face that even I shivered, glad I wasn’t on the receiving end of it. “There *were* eight,” he said quietly.

If the room was quiet before, there wasn’t a peep after *that* statement.

Even the prince reared back in surprise.

“You claim to have killed one?”

Kiel shook his head. “I cannot claim that honor.”

The prince *p-fahed*, a rude noise, then waved his hand at us. “Then you talk in lies.”

“But she can,” Kiel said calmly, lifting his arm to point at me.

Oh.

The prince’s eyes snapped to me, along with the stare of every other being in the room.

I stood firm, looking right back into the black pits of his eyes, instinctually knowing that if I backed down, it would doom us. So, instead, I forced my spine straight and made sure I wasn’t the one who looked away first.

“How?” the prince demanded.

That wasn’t information I was willing to give away. If Kiel wanted them to know, he could tell, but I wouldn’t. The prince must’ve seen that promise in my eyes because he relented and asked another question instead.

“Who do you claim to have killed? And how do you know he’s dead? They have a knack for not dying, you know.”

“Arcadus,” I said, speaking loudly enough to be heard in every corner of the throne room, knowing those nearby would spread the word. “I ripped his throat out. And I know he’s dead because Lycaonus himself announced it to his entire city. And because I know how to make them killable.”

The prince took his time before speaking again, watching us closely as he did, clearly trying to make up his mind whether to believe us or not. “Why are you here, then?”

“Accident,” Kiel said, taking control of the conversation again. “We didn’t intend to be. In fact, we’d rather not be, but as fate would have it, we found ourselves in the path of your men.”

“You want to go back there?” the prince asked. “They will try to kill you.”

“Not if we kill them first,” I said.

“Ha! I like your spirit, pup. I believe you could have killed one of them. So, you simply wish to be taken to the border and released?”

“Ye—”

“No,” Kiel said, cutting me off as he stepped forward.

We didn’t? I stared at him. Fate had been very clear when she said what would happen, what Lycaonus would do. We had to get back and stop him.

“Then, what *do* you want?” the prince growled. “Surely, you don’t want to be thrown in our prisons.”

“We want your help,” Kiel said boldly.

I swallowed. We did?

“Help?” the prince asked warily. “Why? What sort of help?”

“Soldiers,” Kiel said.

I frowned slightly, trying to keep up with him. What was he thinking? Why did we need soldiers? How would that help?

“For what purpose?”

“To cross the river and the mountains with us,” Kiel said, spreading his hands wide. “We know how to kill them, but we lack the numbers to do it. Give us some soldiers, and I will give you the head of Teagetes, who, unless I’m mistaken about our location, is the nearest tyrant to you. The one with the most deaths of your people on his hands. Am I wrong?”

The answering growl that shot through the room was all the answer we needed.

Teagetes was the Alpha of Teagan, one of the smallest cities in our empire. Smaller even than the city we were visiting. Though, the standing guard of the Wulfhere would still number several hundred. More than enough to repel most threats outside of an organized army.

But if Kiel could get a strike force close to the city without raising the alarm, then we could most certainly storm the palace and kill the Alpha before enough troops could assemble to oppose us.

And in doing so, we could be rid of a second Alpha. There would be no hiding the loss of two. People would be forced to see, to start asking questions.

“She will kill him?” the prince asked, pointing at me.

“Yes,” I said, thinking quickly when Kiel didn’t respond.

Did he want the prince to think I was some sort of special weapon? Would that help our cause? I wasn’t sure what he had planned, but if he wasn’t willing to share with the prince, then it made sense I should keep my mouth shut as well. Even if it made more sense to me that everyone knew. It might invite others to try their hand at shattering the stones.

“An intriguing proposal,” the prince said. “But we have no proof that you’ve even killed the tyrant you claim. I won’t sacrifice my men on such unsubstantiated claims.”

Damn. It seemed we weren’t going to get their help after all. I’d thought we were close to convincing him.

“Then, get it,” Kiel said. “We shall stay until you do. Send a runner.”

“You presume to tell me what to do?” the prince rumbled ominously, thunderclouds growing above his eyes. Several of his nearby followers flinched.

Kiel just laughed.

“I know what I’m offering you is well worth the effort to verify our claims,” he said. “You’re smarter than you pretend, which means you know it, too. Let’s cut the small talk.”

The prince laughed. “You make good points. Very well!” He snapped his fingers, and several guards stepped forward. “Show them to their room. I will send for them once I’ve found if they speak the truth or not. If they do, we shall discuss the *potential* of my aid. If you lie ... I shall eat your flesh while you still wriggle!”

The throne room erupted into cheers as we were escorted out.

“I really hope you know what you’re doing,” I muttered to Kiel.

“Me, too.”

Chapter Ten

The door closed, and I rounded on Kiel, finger raised, ready to do some really good pointing and stabbing.

“Tell me the plan, and tell it to me now,” I said before he could get a word out.

Kiel’s mouth snapped shut on whatever he’d intended to say. Instead of answering, however, he wandered past me and into the room we’d been granted for our stay.

Inside, he opened a pair of doors and stepped out onto a balcony. Looking over his shoulder, he gestured with his head for me to join him.

“You can’t avoid answering me,” I said. “I know the room might be nice, with a second-floor view, big bed and all, but you know as well as I do that we’re not guests here, Kiel. We’re prisoners. Those guards never left the door. Those ones there, on the wall, they’re staring right at us. I bet there are more on the roof. Don’t let the balcony fool you, we’re under arrest.”

“I know,” he said, acting like he didn’t care. “But out here, they can’t hear me when I talk to you.”

“Oh.” I nodded, looking out across the balcony, over the wall, and into the small city beyond. The collection of people was unlike anything I could have ever imagined in one place. There were almost no other species within the empire, except for traders who occasionally came through. But even then, I’d never really seen them up close, just from a distance. However, outside the empire, they all just sort of coexisted as if it were the natural way.

Which brought up all sorts of uncomfortable questions about why the empire kept all others out.

“What’s the plan?” I asked impatiently, tugging at the sleeve of my robe. The material wasn’t particularly soft or comfortable, and it itched at every bend of my body in the most uncomfortable way. I would’ve tossed it aside, but after

having been naked since before the mountain collapsed, it was refreshing to be wearing something.

“To talk the prince into giving us soldiers and storming Teagan,” Kiel said.

I stared. “Are you serious? That’s the plan? You’re not working on anything else? Kiel, we need to get out of here,” I said, finishing in a muted hiss to keep the words from traveling. “We can’t play prisoner until the big guy decides he’ll let us go.”

“Ogre.”

“Huh?”

“The prince of this town, he’s an ogre,” Kiel explained. “The size is natural to them.”

“Oh. Whatever. I just want to get out of here.”

“We will. At the head of a column of warriors.” The confidence with which Kiel spoke was almost infectious. It would have been, if I didn’t know better.

“We can’t just sit on our asses and twiddle our thumbs until he comes to a decision. You heard what Fate had to say, about what Lycaonus was going to do. We have to stop him, Kiel. We have to start taking out the other Alphas *now* and free the shards of Fate.”

“What do you think I’m trying to do?” Kiel growled, irritated at my urging.

“I’m saying we don’t have the *time* to do it your way,” I answered, not letting myself be intimidated by his frustration. “We have to go and get to work.”

“Listen to yourself. Actually *listen* to yourself, Jada,” he said with a calmness that incensed me. “You’re talking about ‘taking out the Alphas’ and ‘getting to work’ as if it hasn’t been tried a thousand times before. You know as well as I do that it doesn’t work like that, not that easily. Look at what it cost us to kill Arcadus. How much was sacrificed by others. Did you forget that?”

It was my turn to snarl. “Of course not.”

“Then, how do you plan to get to the Alphas? Even Teagetes. How do you plan to eliminate him, with just the two of us? He’s going to be heavily guarded. More than normal because word about Arcadus will have spread by now. The other Alphas will all know we’ve discovered how to kill them. They’ll take steps to prevent it from happening a second time.”

I clenched my teeth.

Kiel reached out, his strong fingers and thumbs digging into my shoulders as he stared at me sympathetically. His gaze was soft, unlike his grip. “I *want* to go fast. Just like you. Trust me, I do. I’m not happy that we have to do this, but if you think about it, Jada, *we need their help*. I don’t see any other way.”

I thought about it and sighed. “Neither do I,” I said. “You’re right.”

He chuckled.

“What?”

“How much did it cost you to admit *that*?”

I stuck out my tongue, groaning as he rubbed along my traps. “That feels good.”

“Good. It’s supposed to,” he said.

“All right. So, we’re going to seek out a small army from this prince and take them across the border into the empire. We storm Teagan, kill the Alpha, then leave. Am I missing anything?”

“Yes.”

I frowned, thinking hard, trying to find out what I’d missed. But nothing was coming to me. Sure, details were currently being glossed over, including the biggest ones, such as how we would storm the city and how we would make sure to get to Teagetes’ stone so that he was vulnerable. But that was the gist of the plan.

“What? I can’t think of anything.”

“We aren’t addressing what we do now, while at the prince’s mercy,” Kiel said.

“True. What do you think we should do about our house arrest situation?” I asked.

Kiel stroked his jaw. “Strip.”

I blinked. “What?”

Gripping my shoulders a little tighter, he steered me inside and pulled the doors closed behind him.

“Strip,” he commanded again.

“Why? I just put this on. It’s itchy, yeah, but—”

“Now,” Kiel growled with a twinkle in his eye as he turned me around and pulled the robe over my shoulders.

I let it fall to the floor.

“Much better,” Kiel said, taking me by the arm and guiding me to the bed, where he laid me down on my stomach, which was *not* what I’d thought he was doing.

Of course, Kiel had put an end to that, so maybe I shouldn’t be surprised.

When his fingers dug into the flesh of my upper back, I groaned, realizing I’d been had.

“You can’t honestly think I’m going to be distracted by a simple back massage, right?” I asked. “Even if it feels terribly good.”

“No, no, of course not,” Kiel said slyly.

“Good. I’m made of sterner stuff than that.”

“I know,” he agreed.

“I’m glad.” His fingers found something in my lower back, and my face flopped into the bed.

“That’s why I’m giving you a *full body* massage.”

His fingers slid down over my ass, and I melted into the covers, no longer capable of words.

Chapter Eleven

His fingers found knots I didn't know I had and moved in slow, firm circles, pressing them out, releasing the muscles. Each one brought forth a groan of relief as he worked his way down one leg, from hamstring, to calf, and then up the other in the reverse order. The warmth of his hands, the strength of his touch, worked wonders.

"I didn't realize I was so tight," I mumbled at one point just before he started working on my other ass cheek, his hands perhaps a little too free and gratuitous for *just* a massage.

"Me neither, or I would've insisted on this some time ago. I should've known better. You've adapted so well to this new world, but you've been through far too much in the past few months to be anything *but* a ball of tension."

"Yeah, I guess," I said into the covers as he found another cluster of knots and began to work each one free. "This feels amazing."

My brain was swimming on cloud nine, the relief in my muscles spreading a sweet warmth through my body and mind. It was similar to floating in the hot springs near my parents' old house, but so much *better*. Kiel's touch was ... intimate. Although he wanted things between us to be over, or on pause, that didn't stop his fingers from dipping low between my legs as he worked.

Though he never touched my center directly, he offered a certain inadvertent tease that, bit by bit, stirred to life the embers of a flame I hadn't lit since he'd told me who he was. Not because I didn't want to, but because he didn't want it.

But that didn't mean it wasn't there. I wished he saw what I did when I looked at him. The simple, innate drive to be *good* and show the rest of our people what that looked like by freeing them from the grip of tyrants they didn't even know were bad.

There was no need for him to be so hard on himself, but he was trying to shoulder generations' worth of guilt all by

himself. I simply needed to find a way to convince him that he didn't *have* to.

"Kiel ..."

"No," he said. "You need to relax, Jada. We're not as pressed for time as you think."

I stayed silent as he misinterpreted what I was speaking up about. If his mind was still wrapped up in our current plan, then I didn't want to add another distraction by bringing up "us" again. Even if I wanted nothing more than to feel his hands *elsewhere* on my body already.

"There's risk, I know," he continued, thinking he was anticipating my comments. "And I know you want to get moving, that you think we're losing by staying here, but we can't force time. If we rush it, move too fast, then we risk screwing things up or even flat out losing."

"We risk that by taking too long as well," I pointed out.

"And sometimes, you have to slow it down and take in the full picture," he countered.

"But—"

"No buts," he said, his fingers digging deep into the left side of my back. "If we did it your way, we would have to fight our way out of this place. Every inch of our escape would be contested by guards. Not just shifter guards, either. I'm sure you noticed the variety of those who captured us. Are you ready and trained to fight centaurs or the Fae? I'm pretty sure I even saw a dragon in the throne room. Could you handle one of them?"

I remained quiet. He damn well knew the answer to those questions.

"Don't forget," he added in a completely different voice, one lower pitched, less analytical, more emotional, "you can die now, Jada."

"I know," I whispered.

"Which is why we have to think this through. If the prince lends us his soldiers, those who can blend in, at least, we can

storm Teagan. It will be thoroughly unexpected. We take down Teagetes; that's a second Alpha dead."

"You already told me that."

"But if we do it fast and get out, then we keep marching south," Kiel said, a hint of energy slicing into his voice. "We could get to Onetra before word about the attack reaches them. Onetrus isn't any stronger. Perhaps even Macreus would be in reach if we hurried. Taking him out would eliminate fully *half* the Alphas."

"That's ... ambitious doesn't even begin to cover it," I said, trying to sit up.

A firm hand pushed me back into the bed, pinning me so Kiel could start to work on the other side of my back, evening me out. I thought about resisting but swiftly face-planted once more as his thumbs moved in slow swirls across my skin.

"Maybe," he agreed. "Maybe not. They won't be expecting it, that's for sure. Think about it. We've been active in the northwest of the empire. In Lycaon. Spotted in Nycitum. The mountain. All attention is up there. Striking to the southeast without warning at the head of a column of warriors? We could get in real deep. They wouldn't be ready for us. The surprise would totally blindside them."

"Perhaps," I said, still trying to decide whether I should temper his boldness, and if so, how to go about it.

"Even just taking out Teagetes will be huge," he said, showing he could focus on the primary objective. "A second Alpha removed would send ripples through everyone, even if he's a minor compared to someone like Lycaon. We've taken out one near the top, and if we take out one near the bottom, people will notice. They'll begin to wake up."

"And if they don't?"

"They will," he said firmly, his fingers digging in deeper as if to emphasize his point.

I groaned in delight as he found another tight spot I hadn't realized existed just under my shoulder blade. Something released strongly enough that both of us felt it go.

“How can you be so sure?” I finally was able to get out.

“Because I know Lycaonus. The death of another Alpha—or two or three—will provoke him. Each time he will respond, and it will be over the top, and he will lose more control and more supporters because of it. Word will spread.”

“Might not spread fast enough,” I pointed out.

“I know. Which is why we aren’t going to operate on the assumption that we’ll reach critical mass in rebel supporters anytime soon. We have to take what support we can, where we can.”

“Like accepting the prince’s warriors,” I said, filling in his plan.

“Exactly,” he said. “Which is why we’re going to be the perfect little ‘house guests’ of our lovely host, right up until he decides one way or another. I suspect the lure of killing one of the Alphas will be too much, even for him to resist. But if he says no, then we’ll find another way.”

“And if he tries to kill us for being spies?”

“Then we do things your way.”

“Okay,” I said after a moment, my face buried in the covers, muffling my voice. “But there’s still a problem.”

“There is? What did I miss?”

“Your hands have stopped moving.”

Kiel snorted loudly and started massaging again, moving up to the middle of my back. I rolled over smoothly as he did, leaving his hands firmly on my breasts. He tried to pull away, but my fingers clamped around his wrists, holding them firm as I stared up at him with my best inviting stare.

Our eyes locked, and I went for his neck, intending to pull him down on top of me, but he easily resisted, brushing my touch aside.

“I don’t get it,” I said as he stood up straight. “You just gave me a full body massage. Your hands were *very* touchy on my ass and sliding between my legs. You enjoyed it; I enjoyed it.

Why not continue? There's no way it *wasn't* to put me in the mood."

I knew I wanted to. The warmth between my legs was on the verge of flaring up into a full-blown inferno. All that was missing was the spark that would ignite it and the rest of my body.

"Jada," Kiel said, crestfallen. "I-I'm sorry. But I can't. I can't be that person to you. I wasn't thinking. I'm an idiot. I was just trying to distract you from your desire to escape."

"You certainly did. And now, I can think of another way to continue that."

I was throwing myself at him.

"I should have come up with a better way. I can't let you do this to yourself." He shook his head and turned to move away.

My hand shot out, snatching his wrist.

Chapter Twelve

“*Excuse me?*” I asked frostily.

The fire was awakened in me, but it was no lustful throb between my legs. It was a surge of fury and flame that ripped through my entire body, dragging me awake and to my feet as soon as I processed what he’d said.

He said something, but I didn’t hear it over the roar in my ears. He casually broke my grip on his wrist and turned to leave me alone.

“Kiel,” I said sharply enough to make him freeze.

“My name is—”

“I know damn well what your name is. I also know who you were born as. You told me that. I listened. I came to a decision. Do you understand me?”

He frowned. “What are you talking about?”

I was in his face in an instant, my finger stabbing hard into his sternum. “I am my own woman, *Kiel*. Do you doubt that for an instant? Do you think I’m someone’s puppet? That I can’t think for myself?”

“Of course not,” he said a bit brusquely, his hackles rising as I came at him. “I know you’re strong and smart.”

“Then how *dare you* presume to make decisions for me!” I roared in his face, all my anger at his self-inflicted guilt finally exploding.

Deep down in a corner of my mind, the irony of it was not lost on me. I just chose to ignore it at the time.

“Jada, I—”

“You’re not backing away because you don’t like *this*,” I said, waving a hand at my body. “You’re not saying no because you don’t like *me*.” That time, I pointed at my face, meaning my mind.

“Of course not.”

“Which means,” I continued as if he hadn’t spoken, “that, as you said, you’re trying to decide for me. You don’t want me to ‘do this to myself.’ As if I’m blind and unable to think about what it means. Did you ever stop to consider that maybe, just maybe, I care about you enough to be willing to put up with it all?”

I was shouting at the top of my lungs by that point, but I didn’t care. Perhaps that was what I needed to do to finally get things through his thick skull. So far, I’d been careful not to burst, but nothing else had worked. I cared too much to let him just walk away over some perceived fear of what it might mean for me to be with him.

“Now,” I said, calming myself with effort. “We’re going to talk about this. Openly and, more importantly, *rationally*. Like adults. Without trying to end the conversation. Without walking away. Or telling the other person they’re wrong. Because this is already becoming a thing, and it shouldn’t.”

“How can you say that?” he said into the short silence that followed. “I’m ... Jada, *everything* that’s happened to our people since that day is my fault.”

“Oh, really,” I scoffed, shaking my head. “Did you force Lycaonus and the others to bind Fate to the stones? Was it only at the tip of your sword that you beat them into submission and, against their will, made them into immortal tyrants?”

“You damn well know that’s not what I meant,” he growled, his temper shining through as I stripped his arguments bare and tossed them on the floor. “Besides, it was my—”

“And you know damn well they weren’t just willing parties, Kiel. They *wanted* it. They lusted after the power from the very start. Because that’s who they were on the inside. With or without you.”

To my surprise, Kiel looked away with a frown. “I ... I’m not so sure that part is true.”

“Stop being so conceited,” I said. “It’s not just about you.”

There was a knock at the door and a voice followed, saying, “The prince has made his decision. You will come now.”

Kiel's eyes met mine. Frustration simmered in the depths of those delicious blue circles along with desire. He *wanted* it but was too caught up in his martyrdom to swim free. A whirlpool he couldn't escape.

Not on his own.

I grabbed my robe from the bed, shucking it over both shoulders. Kiel eyed my body as it moved, and my pussy throbbed from the lust that he couldn't hide, which was merely an echo of the full thing. I wanted it all. I knew that much. I hadn't planned on being the forward party, the one pushing through walls, but then again, he'd had centuries to put them up. I could wait longer.

But not much.

Striding forward, I leaped at him, legs wide, arms around his neck. He caught me instinctually, and I smashed my mouth against his without warning. Just like grabbing me mid-air, he reacted without thinking, kissing back, the heat of his lips, of his body, stealing the air from my lungs momentarily.

As soon as he gathered himself and pulled his head back, I slid down his body and out of his grip.

"This conversation is *not* over," I growled at him as I put my robe back on. "But just know that you do *not* get to cut me off 'for my own good' in some sort of weird, self-punishment thing. I'm a grown woman, Kiel, and you need to respect that. I can make my own decisions about who I care for. About who I love."

I pushed past him, frantically trying to remain calm, to keep any panic from showing on my face or in my walk. Those last words had just slipped out. I'd absolutely *not* meant to say them because that just took a fire and threw a heaping pile of dried brush on it.

The door shuddered under a more insistent knock, and I went for it, yanking it open.

"We're coming," I snarled angrily enough to send the surprised soldier scurrying backward several steps.

Walking out into the hall, I headed back the way we'd come, not bothering to wait for the others. They'd catch up. And by the time they did, perhaps I would have recovered from my massively inadvertent slip of the tongue.

Love. Had I really said that? Where had that come from? Was I falling in love with Kiel? Things had been moving so fast, so much happening, how could I truly know. Did I even know what love *was*?

I walked into the throne room a step ahead of the soldier sent to fetch us and three steps ahead of Kiel.

By the time we reached the far side of the room, the soldier had scurried ahead, and Kiel had caught up to me, walking at my side. He didn't say anything. I didn't look at him either, instead staring ahead at the prince, the giant ogre who watched us with those beady eyes filled with a dark intelligence.

"I have thought about your proposal," he said without preamble. "It is enticing. For generations, the Alphas have launched attacks across the river. They have stolen our people. Killed our people. *My people!*"

The room echoed with the thundered anger as he slammed a meaty palm on his arm rest.

"We have tried to kill them. They've been run through with swords, arms taken off, and worse. Yet they always come back. They always heal. And then they take more from us. When all we want is to live free of their interference. That is not something they can live with. They must have ultimate power, and so, by wanting nothing to do with them, we defy them. And they kill us for it."

I was waiting for the "but" to come. There was no way enough time had passed for him to send a runner into the empire to discern the truth about Arcadus. Which meant he'd come to a decision on his own. Likely a negative one. He was too cowed by the Alphas, too unwilling to strike out for fear of the reprisals. Not that I could blame him.

"All my peoples, all free peoples, would rejoice to see one of the Alphas brought down." The prince grinned wickedly. "If

it were my warriors who did so, that would be beneficial as well, of course.”

“So, you’ll help us?” Kiel asked.

“I have received word from a ... friend,” the prince said, choosing his words carefully. “One who can travel fast.”

Although the ogre’s eyes never wavered from Kiel and me, the soldier who’d summoned us lacked the composure. His eyes darted to my left, landing on a tall, bare-chested man standing slightly back from everyone else.

Yellow-orange flickered in his gaze. Fire? Was that the man Kiel thought was a dragon shifter? It didn’t matter.

“It seems your claims are true,” the prince said slowly. “You have killed one of the Alphas.”

“I told you we did not lie,” Kiel said.

“True. So, I’ve decided that my men shall strike deep into the empire. That they and you will kill another of these tyrants.”

“Good,” Kiel said, clapping his hands. “I’m glad to hear it. We will all benefit from this.”

“But,” the ogre said, raising a hand, “under one condition.”

Kiel tensed. “Which is?”

“I don’t trust you or her. Not enough. You will go with my warriors. Under *his* command.”

The prince pointed across the room. Kiel and I turned, and I could only just groan as the centaur who had led the party that found us stepped forward, revealing his dirt-filled teeth in a big smile.

Beside me, Kiel inhaled sharply, the sound audible throughout the room. I could just imagine his tendons creaking as every muscle in his body flexed. How long had it been since Kiel had to obey someone else?

The room was all but flooding with testosterone as the two parties stared one another down. Others in the throne room

were slowly edging aside as the giant centaur and proud wolf shifter looked ready to throw down.

Unfortunately, we needed the help of the prince's men, as Kiel had just explained to me. Which meant we couldn't afford for them to come to blows before the mission even started. And wasn't I just the lucky one who got to play peacemaker.

Men.

Yay.

Chapter Thirteen

“Where are all the guards?” Kiel mumbled as we looked down the hill toward the island city of Teagan, the smallest of the shifter cities.

Technically, Onetra had fewer people, but it was sprawled out over a larger area. Teagan was an irregular, triangle-shaped island at the fork of a river, surrounded on all sides by water, with bridges extending off each side onto the shore surrounding it. The bridges were big and wide, built with sturdy stone to support the heavy grain carts that were a constant presence in the city.

Farmers from the plains to the south and east hauled their crops to the city, where they were sold to merchants who shipped them downriver, eventually ending up in the great port city of Helisson, where they were shipped to the rest of the empire and elsewhere. The vast majority of Teagan’s population was involved in the crop trade in one way or another.

But there were other loading towns along the rivers. Teagan just happened to be the largest of them, which was why the Alpha of the territory had set up his seat there. Because of that, the city had seen growth, but it was still very small. Which made scouting it easy—or it should have.

“No guards means an easier attack,” the centaur, whose name was Jurvin, said with obvious glee, practically smacking his lips at the prospect of a walkover.

Kiel, meanwhile, was far more suspicious at the small number of soldiers patrolling the city. So was I. It didn’t seem right.

“Those guardhouses,” I said, pointing to the small buildings on each side of the road at the base of the bridge. “There are five guards in each, so ten per side. We’ve seen patrols of two here and there inside the city itself. So, with twenty guards per bridge, and say, another twenty patrolling, that’s eighty guards total, right?”

“Give or take,” Kiel acknowledged, eyeing the guards on the bridge nearest to us with suspicion.

Most of the guards were lounging around sloppily, not doing much more than acting intimidating. They checked any cart that went in or out of the city to ensure it had actual crops in it, but that was all. There was no thorough inspection, no fear for actual security.

If there were an extra fifty or so guards posted throughout the city that we could see at stations or wandering around, I would feel just as confident that our operation would go off without a success. As it was, however ...

“There’s no way it’s a trap. Right?”

“Unlikely,” Kiel agreed. “So, either Teagetes is *supremely* fully of himself and stupid, or he’s sent them off somewhere.”

“But where?” I mused. “Mount Triumph is too far and out of his territory. That’s in Nycitum. And we haven’t seen any sign of wildfires that he might need help fighting or evacuating people from either.”

“This is why we should attack. Now,” Jurvin grunted, shaking his bulk and backing down the slight incline. “My men and I will do this if you are too wussy to do what needs to be done.”

My hand clamped over Kiel’s mouth before he could say anything.

“Of course not,” I snarled, getting in the centaur’s face. “We’re just going to do this subtly so that *you* don’t make life more difficult by sounding the alarm any earlier than needed.”

“What do you mean?” he asked warily.

Kiel tried to say something behind my hand. I pinched his nose shut and glared at him until he fell silent, his shoulders sagging.

Jurvin started to laugh until I lifted a finger. “Keep egging him on, and I’m dressing you up as a draft horse to pull our cart up to the bridge,” I snapped. “And I won’t be gentle with the whip either.”

The centaur's face bulged, and I prepared myself to jump backward if he came at me with his arms or reared back and tried to clobber me with some hooves.

“You little—”

I grabbed his beard and yanked him down to my level. “You may be in charge, but that’s only going to last as long as you make smart decisions,” I said, my face inches from his. “If you make a single dumb decision, I’m going to let Kiel beat the shit out of you in front of your men, and trust me, that won’t do a damn thing for your command. So, you can either go down to the men there and describe the plan I’m about to give you, or Kiel can knock you out and drag you back by your balls. Your choice, pony boy.”

Red fury danced in the centaur's eyes. I could feel Kiel's surprise through my fingertips as his face stretched wide at my threat, and for a long, terse moment, I wondered if I'd pushed just a little too far.

“You are in trouble,” Jurvin said, not to me but to Kiel. “This one, she’s going to own you.”

Kiel made a noise that equated to *I know*, though he fell silent as I looked at him, his eyes dancing across the sky innocently, landing everywhere but on me.

“Men,” I growled, letting go of the centaur's beard.

“Very screwed,” Jurvin added softly before straightening up as I glared at him. “You mentioned a plan?”

“Yes. You, personally, won’t like it, but it’s the best way to ensure we get the full drop on the guards.”

Jurvin shrugged. “I assume you mean I will not be front and center of the initial attack. You wish surprise. I stand out a little bit. This, I understand. And no, I will not submit to being hooked up to the wagon and covered in a hood to hide my appearance. So, I will remain out of sight until the right time.”

“Good,” I said, then proceeded to outline the rest of my very basic plan. When I finished, I turned it over to the two experienced men to hash out the issues and make it better.

To my surprise, they managed to do so with only a modicum of snide comments to each other. Perhaps I *did* have a bit of a knack for conflict resolution.

Kiel and I headed back down the hill, splitting off from Jurvin, who went to brief the rest of his force. Shortly after, six others hurried toward us to take their role in our plan. The rest, meanwhile, would sneak through the forest as slowly as they could and get as close to the base of the hill and the nearest bridge without being seen.

That didn't mean much, however, because it was still over half a mile into town from there. The trees were the last little scraggle before the mountain leveled off into plains. Everything near the city had been cleared out.

Which was why the eight of us were headed west, into the plains, until our straight line intersected with the road. We paused there, and Kiel addressed the six warriors sent with us.

“All right, which one of you is the worst fighter?” he said.

There was a long pause, and then all eyes turned to one of the men, a young man somewhere around my age. He was just beginning to fill into the thickness of his bear shifter form, so perhaps, he was actually younger.

“Okay,” Kiel said, as the *clack-clack-clack* rattle of wooden wheels on stone road announced a cart approaching. “I’m sorry about this.”

The young shifter had just long enough to look confused before Kiel’s fist cracked him on the jaw and knocked him out. The others stared in shock as Kiel grabbed the man and lowered his limp body to the ground, arranging it just off the side of the road.

“Okay, everyone to the other side of the road,” he ordered. “Into the wheat until you can’t see the road. We wait for the signal.”

“What’s the signal?” one of them asked.

“I’ll tell you. Now, go.”

The others sort of looked at one another as if to see if anyone would voice a complaint. But none did, and they disappeared into the stalks of wheat, crouching low to avoid being seen from the road.

“You got this?” Kiel asked, taking me by the arm.

“Of course I do,” I said, rising on my tiptoes to kiss him. “Now, go. I have a part to play.”

He kissed me a second time with a growl that stole my breath. “Be careful.”

Then he was gone with the others, leaving the unconscious bear shifter and me just as the rattling grain cart appeared. I jumped up and down as it did, waving frantically at the driver and two men sitting with him.

“Help!” I shouted. “Please, help!”

I fell to the side of the shifter, cradling his head in my lap as the cart owner hurried closer, urging his animals into a short burst of speed before he jumped clear and came over.

“What is it? What happened to him?”

“I don’t know!” I wailed. “He just fell over for no reason. Please, help me!”

“We have to get him to Teagan. The healers there can help,” he said, looking over his shoulder. “Get down here. Help me out.”

The two other men swarmed over the unconscious shifter.

“Oh, please do be careful!” I moaned as they went to pick him up.

All I heard was a rustle, and then Kiel was there with the others. They quickly subdued the farmers, knocking them out and tying them up with rope they found in the cart. It wouldn’t hold them for long, but we didn’t *need* it to.

“In and under,” Kiel said as he hopped up in front next to me. Husband and wife teams were quite common, and we hoped would draw less suspicion as we approached the target bridge.

The others climbed into the back of the cart, hiding themselves from the cursory inspection that we'd seen the guards give the other carts. As soon as they were in, we started the horses forward, the seat rattling under our butts.

"So far, so good," I said, leaning my head on Kiel's shoulder.

He rested his on mine for a moment. Was that just him acting the part? Or was he truly taking comfort in my touch? I wanted to ask him, but I didn't want the others to overhear.

Or is it because you don't want to know the truth?

I was still asking myself that question when we pulled to a halt in front of the guard booth. As usual, they just glanced under the tarp and then waved us forward, not bothering to climb in and ensure everything was fine and that, say, half a dozen hard-nosed warriors weren't waiting to jump out and attack.

We crossed the bridge, and halfway along it, I banged a hand hard, three times, against the wood seat to alert the men in the back that it was almost time.

Reaching the bottom of the bridge, Kiel brought the cart to a stop. One of the guards standing around noted it and frowned, starting to wave us forward, wanting us to move out of the way.

"This is not a stopping zone," he barked, coming closer to my side of the cart. "Get a move on."

"All yours," Kiel said as the guard approached with his spear held straight up.

"Thank you, darling," I said and launched myself toward the guard, tackling him to the ground. The whiplash of my attack snapped his head back hard, knocking him out. Then I stole the spear from his hand and attacked the remaining guards, who stood still, stunned.

The men poured out of the back of the cart as we swiftly overwhelmed the guards. Behind us, the sound of clanking armor announced the impending arrival of the guards from the bridge's entrance on the opposite side.

They never made it. Jurvin and the rest of the warriors caught them completely unaware in the middle of the bridge, rolling over them like a tide as we swept into the city and headed straight for the palace. The pair of two-man patrols we came across didn't stand a chance.

The stone-walled estate that served as home to Teagetes fell swiftly, though the guards did manage to take down a trio of Jurvin's warriors before they fell. Those were the only casualties we took as we stormed the grounds.

"This way," Kiel said, heading down a set of stairs deeper into the palace. "His vault will be here."

Jurvin skidded to a halt at the top. "We're here to kill an Alpha," he snarled. "The vermin's quarters will be *that* way." He pointed up the hallway.

"Won't work," Kiel said sharply, still descending. "He's immortal. We have to do it this way."

The centaur snarled and stamped his front legs hard enough to shatter tile underneath. "That was not the plan!" he roared, his men coming up on either side of him, their chests swelling with battle rage.

Yet again, I stepped in between the two towers of testosterone-infused rage, hoping I could settle things a third time. Or fourth. Was it five? I'd lost count.

"Kiel is right," I said gently, holding up my hands to urge them to back down. "Remember, we told you we knew how to kill the Alpha. It's not as simple as ramming a sword down his throat. We have to do this first."

Jurvin glowered, his hooves crushing tile into small bits, but he didn't attack. "If we do it your way, the Alpha will run, and we will never kill him," he rumbled.

It was actually a good point. Given how quickly we'd overrun the palace, Teagetes may choose to take what men he had left and leave, instead of trying to take us down. Stopping him would be necessary.

"Go get him," I said to Jurvin. "Give us some men to ensure we can complete our task. Then we can kill an Alpha."

The centaur nodded sharply and barked a command. A dozen men stayed behind, while he and the others went off in search of the Alpha.

“Come on,” Kiel growled impatiently, hurrying down the stairs. “We’ve wasted enough time as it is.”

Booted feet trampled down the stairs as the others followed us into the lower levels, overrunning several very confused guards who had no idea what was happening topside.

“Thanks,” Kiel said as we approached a thick door that had to be the vault.

“My pleasure,” I said with a smirk. “I know you don’t play well with others.”

Kiel huffed. “I do, too.”

I very clearly made my thoughts on that known without using words. All I got was a huffy “Whatever” accompanied by a roll of his eyes, but he never outright denied my claim. Because he knew better.

Any further remarks died on our lips.

“It’s open,” I said, stating the obvious. The vault door wasn’t locked. In fact, it wasn’t even completely closed. “Why is it open?”

“Good question.” Kiel reached forward and hauled it open, both of us bracing for the trap to be sprung.

But nothing happened other than the door swinging open to reveal the very *empty* vault.

Chapter Fourteen

“What the hell?”

I carefully leaned in through the door, ready to whip my head back at any moment if something nasty happened, but it never did. The vault was empty and devoid of any life whatsoever.

Glancing at Kiel, seeing similar unease reflected on his face, I slowly entered the vault. It was clear it *was* where Teagetes stored his stone. The circular room had a black velvet-lined cradle in the very center perfectly suited for holding a Fate Stone. Only, the cradle was empty.

“Why isn’t it here?” I said, eyeing the other warriors standing out in the hallway.

“It’s a trap,” Kiel snarled worriedly. “Everyone spread out. Get ready for it. They knew we were coming somehow.”

We left the vault behind before the door could slam shut on us and started slowly working our way back toward the stairs, everyone waiting for the shoe to drop.

Noises from up ahead announced the guards’ approach. We steeled ourselves, everyone ready to fight like wild animals to free ourselves from the grip of the Wulfhere.

The thunder grew louder.

“That doesn’t sound like armored guards,” I said to nobody in particular. “And why would they come so noisily. It doesn’t make any—”

Jurvin came charging down the stairs, his big, four-legged centaur frame forced to move slightly sideways. Given how front-heavy he was, it must be a nightmare to navigate stairs designed for bipeds. The big half-horse skidded to a stop.

“So, it’s not a trap?” someone said.

“What’s going on here?” Jurvin asked, his jaw clenching. “You promised us the death of an Alpha. But the vermin is

nowhere to be seen! His offices, his quarters, they're empty. Nothing for us to kill!"

"The vault is empty, too," Kiel snapped. "Something—"

"You are a liar!" Jurvin roared, rearing back on his hind hooves. "Why did you truly bring us here?"

"To kill an Alpha, you dumb draft mare!" Kiel bellowed and spread his arms wide. "But clearly, something else is going on here. Since neither of us is dead or surrounded by Wulphere or Volk, it stands to reason that *something* is up. After all, we all noticed the lack of guards everywhere. Now, we know."

"We do?" I asked.

"They're with Teagetes," Kiel said. "And Teagetes *and* his stone aren't here."

Jurvin's eyes flicked back and forth between Kiel and me as he listened.

"Why did he take the stone?" I said.

"I don't know." Kiel shook his head. "I don't know, and I don't like it. Something about this stinks really bad."

"Agreed." I shot Jurvin a look. "This wasn't part of the plan. Something happened that we don't know about, and we need to find out what's going on. Now."

"Alphas leave sometimes," Jurvin said, surprising me by trying to be helpful instead of combative. "We know this."

"Yeah, I know," I agreed. "But they never take their Fate Stones with them."

"Come on," Kiel said, pointing up the stairs to the main floor. "We need to figure out where he went and why. Perhaps we can go after him, attack him while he's traveling and even more vulnerable."

Jurvin liked that idea and, with a sharp cry, charged up the stairs. Partially due to eagerness, but I also suspected taking the stairs slow was extremely uncomfortable and awkward for him.

"Where to?" Kiel asked as we reached the top.

“His offices,” I said, trying to think on my feet. “Maybe there’s a letter? A memo? Something.”

We started walking. I looked at Jurvin, catching his attention. “I don’t suppose you left any soldiers you found alive, did you?”

The centaur’s face gave me all the answers I needed.

“Didn’t think so,” I growled, frustration growing. Whatever we were missing was important, I could sense it. We just needed to know *why*, and all our potential leads were dead.

Teagetes’ office was mostly untouched. With no guards present, one of Jurvin’s men had only quickly scoured the room, then left. Now, I entered it with a careful eye to the big desk that sat in front of the huge floor-to-ceiling window. There was nothing on the surface, but his drawers revealed numerous correspondence.

“Here, everyone take some papers and start reading, see if you can find any mention of trips or reasons for him to leave,” I said, tossing stacks of paperwork on the table.

With all Jurvin’s warriors helping us—those who could read, at least—it took us minutes to discover there was nothing of help amid all the documents.

“Damnit!” I roared, pointing at the desk. “Smash it. Search for hidden compartments.”

In seconds, the desk was nothing but kindling. We *did* find love letters most certainly *not* from Teagetes’ mate, but that was it.

“Where the hell did you go?” I growled, staring out the window.

There was a commotion behind us. Whirling, I saw two of Jurvin’s warriors hauling an elderly man into the office.

“Who’s this?” I asked as they pinned the well-dressed shifter to the wall.

“No idea. We found him hiding in a closet.”

Kiel strode up to the older man, who was sweating profusely as his eyes darted wildly between the two warriors holding him still and Kiel, who towered in front of him with eyes promising death.

“*Where is he?*” Kiel snarled in low, threatening tones, getting right in the old man’s face.

The shifter whimpered, and I feared he’d wet himself. Even so, it was clear that intimidation wouldn’t work.

“Wait,” I said, intervening. “Hold on.”

Kiel glanced at me as I stepped up next to him. “Let me do it.”

“Okay.” He crossed his arms and waited.

“Alone,” I added.

Kiel looked ready to argue with me, but a narrowing of my eyes told him it wouldn’t be a smart or winning idea.

“I’ll be fine,” I said. “I think I can handle gramps over here if he gets uppity, thank you very much.” I turned toward the man and smiled sweetly. “Which he’s not going to do, is he?”

The older man shook his head, the motion jerky and afraid.

“Exactly. Now, all of you, *out*.”

Reluctantly, and at Kiel’s urging, the others left the room and closed the door behind them.

“Sorry about that,” I said to the older man, brushing off his shoulders, noting the nice suit he was wearing. “You’re on Teagetes’ staff, aren’t you?”

The older man nodded.

“Come on, you can speak. Right?” I said, giving him a big, wide, innocent smile. Portraying what I hoped he’d assume was feminine weakness.

“Y-yes, of course,” he said, slowly recovering, though his gaze kept darting to the door, as if Kiel and the others would come charging in and take his head off.

“Don’t worry about them. They’ll leave you alone now, I promise,” I said, waving a hand in the direction of the hallway and the warriors.

There was a crash from outside. I rolled my eyes, noting how the elderly servant jumped at the noise.

“So, Teagetes isn’t here, I notice. But he left you behind.”

“I never travel with him anymore. The trips are too harsh on my body,” the older shifter said with a wry, self-deprecating smile.

“Of course, of course,” I said, smiling as he composed himself enough to joke a little. “So, where did he go?”

The servant’s mouth clacked shut.

I sighed. “Listen. We can do this one of two ways. Either you can just tell me, and that’s that, or I can let those men out there have at you. One will just break your bones until you tell him. The other, the four-legged one? He’ll ask about your family first. Then he’ll haul everyone back to your home and make your family watch as he tortures you. Then he’ll force you to watch him kill each of them, leaving you alive but permanently crippled.”

A part of me was screaming in horror at how *calmly* I could describe such horrors, but the truth was, we didn’t have time to waste. Additionally, if I could *scare* him into telling me, then I would be *sparing* him the pain.

“So,” I asked, facing the servant. “What’s it going to be?”

I pushed open the office door and slammed it closed behind me.

“Where is he?” Kiel asked without hesitating.

“It’s not good,” I said, running my hands through my hair. “Not at all.”

Jurvin was leaning over us, listening.

“Why? What did you learn?”

“Lycaonus apparently summoned a council of Alphas,” I said softly. “Teagetes left two days ago. He’s long gone.”

Jurvin snarled angrily, turning away to punch a fist through the wall.

“What?” Kiel said, shaking his head. “No, that’s impossible. The timing doesn’t line up. There’s no *way* Lycaonus was freed and sent out messengers fast enough for Teagetes to have left *two days* ago. They would have had to dig Lycaonus out of the mountain within hours, at best, for that to be even possible.”

“This happened *before* he chased us to Mount Triumph,” I said softly. “The request was dated a week and a half ago, according to his servant. I’ll bet Lycaonus summoned them all in response to Arcadus’ death. We’re just finding out about it now.”

“Shit.” Kiel was clenching and unclenching his fists over and over again as he thought.

“You know what this means,” I said quietly.

“Yes, I do,” he rumbled. “It means that when they free Lycaonus ...”

“... the other Alphas will already be there,” I finished. “Waiting for him.”

Kiel bared his teeth. “We have to get to Lycaon. *Now*. Teagetes will be in no rush. He’ll take the full four, maybe even five days, to make the journey. Partially to not push himself, but also to show Lycaon that he’ll take his time responding to orders. If we run nonstop, we can beat him there. Barely, but we can.”

“What will we do when we get there?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “But we can’t stay here. Come on, we have to leave.”

We started to go, but Jurvin took a step forward, blocking our path. Behind him, his warriors fanned out.

“We were promised the death of an Alpha, vermin,” he growled ominously. “And you haven’t given us what we

want.”

Shit. We did *not* have time for that.

Chapter Fifteen

To my surprise, Kiel didn't instantly lash out. Instead, he spread his hands wide in apology.

"Listen, Jurvin," he said calmly. "I'm sorry this didn't end how we wanted. But it's still been a huge success. The guards are scattered and defeated. We killed plenty of them. Your men are largely unhurt. The entire city is open to you. Take what you want from it and leave unimpeded. This isn't a loss."

I frowned, thinking quickly. "Or you could come with us," I added, providing another option.

Kiel made a warning sound in the back of his throat, his body twisting slightly, showing his disdain for the idea.

I ignored it.

"The Alphas are assembling in Lycaon," I pointed out. "All those remaining will be there. That's where we're going. And we'll be striking at them. Don't know how yet, as you heard, but if you want to kill an Alpha, coming with us will be your best chance. Who knows, maybe we can kill multiple Alphas."

An eager growl ran through the group of warriors. Low and barely heard, but felt all the same, it spoke to their eagerness to kill the empire's leadership. I was playing off that desire, trying to sway the court of public opinion in our favor. Right then, I honestly didn't care if they wanted to join or not. I doubted they could keep up with the pace Kiel and I intended to set.

But if they could ... Well, any help would be both appreciated and necessary.

The big centaur shook his head. He definitely did not toss it. Or whinny.

"Lycaon is a trap," he said. "Too many soldiers. Too much danger. Coming here was a risk, but one we could handle. Following you *through* your own territory to the *capital* of your empire is the height of folly. We will not go that way."

So much for that.

“I’m sorry you feel that way,” I said. “But I can understand it. Thank you for helping us here, but I suppose this is where we part, then.”

Jurvin chuckled nastily. “I don’t think so.”

“So, you’re coming with us anyway?” I asked, feigning ignorance in hopes of finding a way out of the situation.

“Not quite, little pup,” the centaur said, leaning down to bring his face to my level. “You are coming with us. Back to the prince. There, you will explain how you intend to atone for the death of three of my men during this *failure* of yours. Three of us dead, and no body of an Alpha. Unacceptable.”

“You’re fucking joking, I hope,” I hissed. “You can ransack the entire damn city if you want. The guards have fled. That is no failure.”

“It is. We could do this any time. We don’t because of the reprisals it invites,” Jurvin said. “Do you think we’ll just go on home and enjoy our life in peace? No. Word will spread, the Alpha will hear of it, and the men in steel will come for us. They will burn our homes and our lands. Drive us back into the wilds. All because *you* failed. You have to answer for your ___”

Kiel’s fist came flashing in out of nowhere. *Crack.*

I stepped back as the centaur crashed to the floor, knocked clean unconscious by the blow.

“Your conflict resolution skills weren’t working,” Kiel said. “So, I tried mine. They worked.”

I snorted, and then, as one, we looked up at Jurvin’s warrior band.

“Anyone else want to try to keep us here?” Kiel snarled.

A path cleared for us, and we took it, walking down the hallway and out into the fenced-off yard that surrounded the palace. The gates were open, one of them barely hanging on from where Jurvin had charged it. We walked through them and into the city, picking up the pace.

I headed for the southwestern bridge, the one with the most direct route to Lycaon, but fingers on my arm stalled me.

“What? I thought we were headed toward Lycaon?” I asked, pointing. “It’s that way.”

“Jurvin made a good point,” Kiel said. “We can’t do this alone. As much as I want to beat them there, we’re going to need help. We need a plan. Just walking into Lycaon and trying to attack is a good way for us all to end up dead and hand Lycaonus his victory.”

“But Teagetes is almost there.”

“It’s going to take them days, if not *weeks*, to free Lycaonus from the mountain. He’s buried deep. Yes, the others will be in the city when he arrives, and we’ll have to find a way to lure them out. But no matter *what* we do, we can’t do it with just the two of us. We need help.”

I nodded, acceding to his logic. “You’re right. Where do we get it?”

“The rebellion,” he said. “Andi and Clive will have our backup base running by now. Perhaps not fully operational, but for now, it’s our best bet. From there, we can send out word. See how many will come.”

“And if it’s not enough?”

“It will have to be,” he said quietly, pulling me along toward the southeastern bridge.

I jogged alongside him as we left the city behind. I hoped Jurvin and his band would go easy on the citizens of Teagan. They didn’t deserve the plundering, but I knew even worse would happen if we didn’t stop Lycaonus.

“Hopefully, they’ve gotten in touch with most people by now,” I said, trying to sound optimistic.

“I’m sure they’ve done their best,” Kiel grunted. “You must be ready for what that will entail, however.”

I frowned. “Wait? Me? What are you talking about? Who will be there?”

Kiel glanced over at me. “I would assume Gare will be there,” he said softly. “And you *will* make things right with him. No matter how painful.”

“Oh,” I said, my heart going into overdrive, making my hands clammy. “Right. Yeah. He needs to hear about his father.”

“From you, Jada.”

“Yeah, from me,” I said, suddenly no longer as eager to see Clive and Andi.

Our visit would not be pleasant.

I hardened my will because, as true as that was, it was my fault it had gotten so far. It was time to put things right.

Now, if only I could predict how Gare would handle me telling him his father was dead.

Chapter Sixteen

I came to a halt, my paws digging deep into the soft grasses of the untilled field we were crossing, the final stretch before we reached the new hideout. In mere minutes, we would be there.

Which was why I was stopping.

The stiff wind brushed against my fur, sending rippling waves through the long white hair that translated into soft touches against the skin far beneath. Closing my eyes, I reveled in the sweet caress of nature, devoid of any sounds of civilization. In fact, the only thing I could hear beyond the roar of my pulse was Kiel panting softly nearby.

Despite him saying we had time, that excavating Lycaonus would be a task measured in weeks compared to days—if not *months*—we didn't intend to dawdle. After all, the Alpha was one lucky guess away from being dug up even earlier. We had six other immortals to kill before that happened.

Thus, the relentless pace Kiel had set as we headed deeper into Teagan territory. The mountain range that separated the empire from those on the outside ran northwest-southeast in a line. However, there was a range that curved out and around to partially enclose the vast plains of Teagan from the bottom, forming a sort of semi-circle of mountains around the farming territory.

It was toward those mountains we were headed. Even now, the nearest loomed above us, the edge of the plains two miles away, perhaps less. Then, the ground rose sharply, becoming rocky and covered in scrub.

“Are you ready for this?”

My eyes snapped open as Kiel spoke, the first words we'd spoken in the better part of a day because of the faster nature of traveling in our wolf forms. My beast whined in my head, wanting to get closer to him as he stood there in the nude with wind whipping at his hair but otherwise unaffected by him.

Yes, he's hot. But now isn't the time for that.

More than just my wolf disagreed with that. It had been too long, my body told me. Too long since I'd experienced the strong, powerful lovemaking of the man I was falling brutally head-over-heels for. Was falling? Had fallen? Did it even matter anymore?

I shifted into my human form. The wind was far brisker than I'd realized, puckering my skin and making several things stand on end in the chill. Kiel's eyes darted to my bared breasts, noting the tightness of my nipples, but he made no comment. His gaze *did* linger, but only for a few seconds longer than was acceptable.

He'd seen it all before—and in a far different setting. So, really, what did I care?

“Not at all,” I admitted at last, finally answering his question and doing so truthfully.

There was no point in lying to Kiel or trying to put on a stoic front. He knew me too well by now. He would see right through my facade. Better to just tell him the truth and be open with him. Hopefully, it would foster the same in return. Though, that might have been wishful thinking.

He knew he cared for me. I knew he cared for me. He knew I knew, and I knew he knew that I knew. Around and around. Yet centuries of self-loathing, hatred, hearing the songs sung about him, about his people, the stories told, the legends of his monstrous nature, ate away at him. And much as I wanted to, it looked like it would be a long task to tear down the walls he'd built to keep everyone out.

Even if he wanted desperately to let me in. Which I *think* he did. It had just been so long that he'd forgotten *how*.

“Jada,” he started to say before coming to a screeching halt as I lifted a hand to stop him.

Taking a deep breath, I let it—and as much anxiety as I could—flow out of me. “Just because I'm not ready for it, that I am, in truth, *terrified* of it, does not mean I'm not going to do it.”

Kiel's eyes flashed with what I hoped was pride.

“I don’t want to,” I said bluntly. “But I will. As you said, this is the right thing to do. I didn’t do it the first time. I’m not going to fail myself, or Gare, a second time.”

He came closer, gripping me by the shoulder. “Good.”

I dipped my head in acknowledgment.

“I’m proud of you,” he added after a moment, his fingers digging into my shoulder a little as he gently massaged it.

“Thank you.”

His hand ceased moving. “For what? Being proud of you?”

I laughed softly. “No. That’s nice to hear, don’t get me wrong, but no. I was thanking you for something else. For not holding something I did in the past against me. Especially when I work to atone for that mistake.”

My eyes bored into his as I spoke, holding his gaze and not letting it go. I held it. And held it, not speaking, watching his face. Waiting.

The entire process played out in front of me. The tightening of the corners of his eyes as he realized I was sending a message with my comments. A mild unfocusing of his pupils as his brain worked to replay my words. The slight furrowing of his brow as he worked to understand my point. And then, realization.

Kiel’s eyebrows shot up, then came right back down, continuing past the *thoughtful* level and moving into *frown* territory.

“That is different,” he growled, dismissing my point with three stupid words. “Very different.”

“Is it?” I challenged as he shifted back into his wolf form. “Or are you just trying to *pretend* it is?”

His only response was to leap away.

I shook my head at his departing form. “Sometimes, I wish the centaur had won,” I called after him.

An angry snarl echoed across the plains, bringing a smile to my face. Then I shifted and loped after him, following his

scent at my own pace until I caught up with him three miles ahead and several hundred feet up the side of the mountain. It was more a very large hill, not having quite achieved the steepness of the mountain peak it would become, but it was close enough.

He waited at a slight leveling of the hill, which led up to a large boulder around which dirt had piled. Over time, that dirt had become home to grass and even a few bushes, anchoring the giant piece of rock in place to form a natural continuation of the hillside.

He waited until I was close, then walked straight into the boulder. I came to a halt, staring at where he'd disappeared. That was impossible. People couldn't just disappear.

Upon closer inspection, it turned out I was right. There *was* a hole, but it was very cleverly concealed so that unless someone approached from the correct direction, it would be effectively hidden.

I entered the hole, which turned out to be an old mineshaft concealed by the boulder. Kiel was there, waiting for me, having already shifted back and donned a robe from the stack near the entrance. He was holding out another for me.

"Seems a bit obvious, doesn't it?" I asked, pointing at the crate containing the robes. "Like, if anyone comes in, they'll know someone's using it."

Kiel nodded. "True. The farmer who owns all the land around here is sympathetic to our cause. So, we don't have to worry about trespassers. But you're right. We should probably move it back out of sight."

He closed and lifted the trunk, carrying it with us as we walked into the mineshaft. Not long after we rounded the first corner, two people came hurrying up the tool-made tunnel carrying lit torches.

"Clive!" I cried, running forward to embrace my best friend.

"Damn, it's good to see you again," he said as we briefly gave each other a squeeze.

“You, too,” I said, looking at Andi with a smile and nod. She wasn’t much into hugging, so I didn’t bother trying.

Kiel exchanged a firm handshake with both, and then the pair led us deeper into the tunnel, walking side by side ahead of us.

As we walked and took a left into a large cavern, Clive was busy explaining what they had done with the place and where everything was. I listened with half an ear. Not just because I was distracted by my upcoming talk with Gare, but also because Clive wasn’t really speaking to Kiel and me. He was talking to Andi.

And, I noted with watchful eyes, she was mostly talking back to him. Which was only natural. They’d spent weeks there getting the place set up, sending out very discreet word to other members of the rebellion and getting people settled.

But ...

“Hey, guys,” Gare said, walking into the room as if nothing were wrong.

To him, it wasn’t. But my blood turned to ice, and my breath froze in my chest as I forgot how to breathe. Everything was suddenly a reality.

I waited until greetings were exchange, then I jerked my head at Gare, hoping it didn’t look as forced and stiff as it felt.

“Hey, can we talk?” I croaked, filled with nerves.

“Sure?” he said with a frown. “What’s up?”

“Alone?” I said, looking at one of the cavern’s exits.

“Okay.” He followed my gaze, and I, after a very brief hesitation that definitely was not because my legs momentarily refused to work, went after him.

Chapter Seventeen

We walked for longer than was necessary to get out of earshot of the others. I needed the time to compose myself and bring my heartbeat down, try to find some spit to keep my throat from turning into the Maccreean Desert and somehow figure out what I should actually say.

“This isn’t going to be a good talk,” Gare said, broaching the near silence. “Is it?”

The only other noise was the flickering flame from the torch he held in his right hand. I eyed the stick with the flaming wooden rag on one end a little nervously. It would make an excellent weapon.

“No,” I managed to get out.

“Did something bad happen?” he asked.

I nodded, thankful for the leading questions. But I couldn’t continue letting him do the probing. It was on me. I had to tell him the truth. A truth I should have told him on the barge last time I saw him right after it happened.

“Yes,” I added. “Yes, something did. But it happened before we parted ways.”

Gare frowned warily. “It did? Why am I just now finding out about it?”

I sighed. “Because I was a coward, Gare. I didn’t have the courage to tell you.”

“What?” I could see from how his eyes focused that he was starting to realize it was directly related to him.

“We got split up,” I said. “Back in Lycaonus. You remember? The guards cut us off from you.”

“I know,” he said. “Am I in some sort of trouble for that? You told us ahead of time. Nobody slows. Just keep going. That’s what we did.”

I smiled weakly. “No, no, you’re not in trouble at all, Gare. You did the right thing. That was the plan, and you carried it out. No, this is about what happened with us. When we were trapped by the guards.”

“How is that bad?” he asked. “You clearly escaped because you joined us on the barge.”

“Yes,” I said, looking away, then forcing myself to look back at him. I owed it to him to not be a coward. Again. “But only because we had help, Gare.”

“Help?” He shook his head. “There was nobody else. You two were last. Who helped you ...”

The question never quite formed because the knowledge came to him before he finished his sentence.

“Your father,” I said quietly, making sure my eyes never left his. “He came out of nowhere, Gare. Blocked the blow that would’ve taken my head from my shoulders.”

I didn’t bother telling him I would have—eventually—survived the blow because it didn’t matter. What mattered was how his father had acted.

“He did?” Gare shook his head. “He only had one arm ...”

“I know. And he was brilliant with it,” I whispered, tears pooling in the corners of my eyes, blurring my vision. “He told us to go. To run and not let the rebellion die.”

I swiped at my eyes, shaking my head, pushing ahead when Gare didn’t immediately say anything. “So, that’s what we did. We ran. Into the tunnels and down to the barge.”

“And they killed him,” Gare said bluntly, without much in the way of emotion.

“Yes,” I said. “And I didn’t tell you. I should have, I should have let you know right then and there on the barge what he did. That he saved us. But I didn’t. I’m so sorry, Gare. I’m so sorry. You deserved better than that. Your *father* deserved better than that. He was a good man, and I failed you both by being a coward and not wanting to tell you.”

Gare was silent as I babbled. That seemed like a better path, so I clamped my mouth shut and resolved not to say another word until he responded.

It took several minutes. He was leaning heavily on the wall with one arm. His breathing had gotten quite rapid, but he was working to slow it down and gain control.

“They killed my dad,” he said, shoulders rising and falling. “They struck him down after he saved you, and you just ... *kept that to yourself?*”

The words exploded out of him.

“That was *weeks* ago, Jada. Weeks!” he shouted. “My father has been dead this whole time, and you knew about it. I could have been there. I could have gone back. My mother, oh, god, Mom. She’s been there alone. Without me.”

I was shaking. Trembling.

“Does she know?” he hissed.

“Probably, but I don’t know,” I said. “I just don’t know, but I would think so. She stayed behind. I’m sorry, Gare, I should have told you, and I—”

“*You’re damn right you should have told me!*” he roared, spinning away from the wall and taking a threatening step toward me.

I backed up until my shoulders hit the rough stone of the tunnel wall. Gare’s eyes were huge in the torchlight, dancing with a flame I wasn’t entirely sure came from the torch.

“I failed you,” I whispered. “I’m sorry. I can’t change it, but if I could, I would. I would go back and change it all if I had that power, Gare, but I don’t. All I can do is apologize. To tell you I’m sorry. Gare, I—”

“No,” he said so coldly I feared for my own safety. “No more apologies from you. I don’t need to hear what a coward has to say.”

I took that, and I didn’t flinch. It was easy because it was true.

“What you did was despicable,” he snarled darkly. “You let me go on thinking everything was fine. My mother likely thinks we’re *both* dead because I haven’t communicated with her. I can’t begin to imagine her distress.”

I clamped my mouth shut. He didn’t want to hear me talk, didn’t want my apologies. It was best to let him vent.

“Just because you fucked up now doesn’t mean you can make amends so easily. My mother ...” He shook his head. “I have to let her know I’m alive. I have to make sure *she’s* okay. What if they went after her for reprisals? I don’t know if she’s alive, even. She might have died thinking she had nothing left.”

He pushed past me, heading up the shaft toward the surface.

I opened my mouth to call out for him. To try to bring him back, to tell him he was needed for what was coming next. He was a good warrior, and his skills would be a huge asset to our mission to infiltrate Lycaon.

But I couldn’t bring myself to tell him that. The guilt he would feel, regardless of which side he chose, would be horrible. Besides, how could I come between a man and his mother? Even if he knew the location of our new hideout and was headed back to the lair of the beast. If Lycaonus’ men captured him ... all the work Andi and Clive had put into that place would be for naught. We’d be on the run. Again.

Yet I still let him go.

I really hope I’m making the right choice this time. If I’m not ...

Kiel came upon me an unknown amount of time later. I was still standing in the same place, staring at where Gare had disappeared out of sight.

“How did it go?” he asked softly.

“Not well,” I said with a snuffle, wiping at the tears on my cheeks with the back of one arm. “Not well at all. He’s gone. He said he had to go home. That he needed to see his mother, to make sure she was okay, to let her know she had something

left. I didn't stop him. I know I should have, that it's a huge risk, letting him go. But, Kiel, I—"

"Shhh," Kiel said, placing a finger over my lips. "It's fine, Jada. You made the right call."

"Are you sure?" I whispered. "What if he's so angry he betrays us? Or is captured and made to tell?"

"He won't give us up," Kiel said, shaking his head. "But he might get captured, yes. It's a risk we have to take. He needed to do this, and you needed to let him go."

"If you say so," I whispered.

"I do," Kiel said. "Now, come with me."

"Where are we going?"

"To distract you and help you relax," he rumbled, one arm around me, steering me back down the tunnel and deeper into the mineshaft.

Chapter Eighteen

To distract me?

“Kiel,” I groaned. “I really don’t think I’m in the mood for *that* right about now. As much as I’ve been trying to convince you, your timing is—”

“It was my idea,” he said.

“Huh? What was? If you mean to distract me with sex, then yes, I know it was your idea?”

“Not that. Everything. All of this.”

“I’m not following. Please just spit it out. None of this back and forth while I try to pull some context out of you. I’m really not in the mood after dealing with the results of a really bad decision.”

“We all make bad decisions,” he said, his arm still draped over my shoulders.

Despite my protests to the contrary, having him that close, that *comfortable* with me, was actually pushing through my mood.

“You sided with the Alphas,” I said, leaning a head on his shoulder. “I know that. And you’re making up for it.”

“Not quite,” he corrected. “You’ve got it backward. I didn’t side with them, Jada. *They sided with me.*”

“Huh? Now, you’ve lost me.”

“It was my idea. The very core problem of it all,” he said, “was *my* idea. To bind Fate. To create the stones. It was *my* idea, Jada. They agreed with me and said they would help.”

Following his admission, it was as if a weight was lifted from his shoulders. It ran through his entire body, journeying through his arm and mine. A very physical and obvious shudder.

“How long have you been holding that in?” I asked quietly, forcing myself back against his side when he tried to pull

away. “How long since you told anyone?”

“Since the last member of my pack was killed,” he said. “I haven’t told anyone else since then.”

“So, why me?”

“Because ...”

He was so close. The words were right there.

“Try harder than *‘because,’*” I urged, squeezing his arm in encouragement as I let him gather his thoughts.

“Because you’re special to me,” he said after an eternally long pause. “And I don’t want to hide things from you. It’s like this *thing* inside me is pushing it all out, making me want to tell you and confess my many sins. So that you’ll judge me and hate me. But also because I want you to *know* me and maybe, just maybe ...”

“Accept you? Forgive you?” I whispered.

“*Yes.*” His reply was barely audible, a shuddered, near painful thing. But he *said* it.

“I forgive you,” I said louder. “Your past is your past, Kiel, and I don’t hold it against you. I never have. I never *will*. Because that man—that man died with the last of your pack. The man you are now, *that man*, is the man I care for. The man I want.”

“Are you sure you want to go down this road?” he asked. “Remember what I said. Everyone will judge you. They will hate you.”

“But you won’t,” I pointed out. “Neither will those who truly care for me. They already suspect something’s different about you. Andi. Clive. Others, I’m sure. When the time comes, your *friends* will be there for you, Kiel. I’ll be there for you.”

“As my friend?”

“As whatever you want me to be,” I said honestly, perhaps the most open we’d been about the future. “As long as you want me to be.”

“I want you to be,” he growled. “I want you.”

“Then, take me,” I whispered.

Kiel’s growl echoed throughout the tunnel as he spun, grabbed me, and lifted me in one smooth motion.

I grabbed at his neck, holding on tight as he pinned me between him and the wall of the mineshaft. The torch he’d been holding clattered to the ground as he pulled my robe open, his hand grabbing for my breasts even before his mouth found mine, our lips meeting with an equal amount of need.

He was rough and eager and urgent beyond need, but I didn’t care. Just like I didn’t care that we weren’t anywhere private. There was no wall, no door, nothing to watch as we stripped each other of clothes, our kisses exploring exposed skin, from neck to chest to stomach and below.

I dropped to a squat, gently stroking his shaft as I looked up at him, seeing his abs and chest contract in the flickering firelight every time I touched him. He groaned when the tip of my tongue flicked out and ran along his balls to the base of his shaft and then up the underside. I paused to play with the little fleshy bit on the underside, earning me a second groan.

Then I took him deep into my mouth, making sure I looked up as often as I could as I treasured the warmth of his cock, enjoying how it fully stiffened in my mouth until it practically throbbed in my grip.

Kiel was leaning back against the wall, his hips thrusting gently into my mouth, making me drool ever so slightly. It dripped from the base of his shaft, falling on my chest and across my tits. Every time he saw it, he got harder. I may have added to it, glad he was enjoying the sight.

“Fuck, if you keep that up, I’m going to come,” he growled.

“Do it, then,” I said, shoving his cock as far down my throat as I could while I continued to fondle his balls.

Moving faster, using my tongue, lips, and a hand on his slick shaft, I stroked him rapidly. His groans intensified. His abs flexed hard, and I felt his balls retract, a surefire sign he was about to—

“I’m fucking coming,” he groaned loudly an instant before he shot a thick, hot stream of cum into my mouth. I swallowed it as fast as I could, trying not to let any escape, but a little dribble made its way down the left side of my mouth.

Kiel grabbed my head, pushing it down, nearly making me gag as his cock pulsed. I sucked it and gripped his shaft, stroking it to get every last drop, the salty aftertaste a sign of a job well done.

“That was fucking incredible,” he hissed, finally sagging back against the wall. I let his cock go with a *pop* as it came free from the suction of my lips.

“Good. That was the point.”

He grinned, then bit his lip as I used a finger to spoon the little dribble into my mouth and swallow it with a wink. His cock twitched, and I didn’t bother to hide a smile.

“My turn,” he growled, pushing me back.

I grabbed a nearby robe, I had no idea whose, and put it under me as Kiel practically dove between my legs.

“Easy there, I’m not leaving, you don’t—*fuckkkk*.”

“You were saying?” he teased.

“Shut up and lick my pussy,” I commanded.

“My pleasure,” he said with a chuckle I could feel.

His tongue parted my pussy, gently flicking against my clit from below, then running soft and gentle over the top. Following up with circles, he licked and kissed me over and over until my body was trembling. I had one hand plastered over my mouth to muffle my cries.

There was no way anyone would mistake what was happening in the tunnel. It was very clear someone was on the edge of orgasming—and that someone was *me*. Kiel’s tongue was absolutely wicked, and when he slipped a finger inside me, I arched backward, unable to control myself any longer.

My arm slipped free of my mouth and the tunnel filled with the sounds of me coming all over his mouth, my hips bucking.

I could only breathe in short gasps as every muscle in my body contracted just before unbelievably intense ecstasy exploded *outward*, flattening me against the floor, pinning me in place while I rode the wave as it crashed through my body.

“Fuck.” It was the only word I could get out, somehow managing to express shock, disbelief, amazement, and thanks, all in one four-letter word.

Kiel laughed, rolling onto his back, his chest rising and falling. I lay there next to him for several moments, collecting myself.

“The torch is going out,” he said casually.

I glanced over, past his body, to see that the flame was indeed dying.

“I guess we should make the best of it, then,” I murmured, running a hand across his abs and gripping his cock, which was starting to swell once more.

“Works for me,” he grunted as I sat over him and lowered myself onto his cock, moaning softly as he pushed inside me, my walls spreading to accommodate the long, hard length of his perfect cock.

I settled onto him, breathing in and out, giving myself some time to stretch around him. He was quite thick, and that angle meant I was taking it *deep*.

But the primal need inside me, to feel him slide in and out, could not be denied. Digging my fingers into his chest, staring deep into the blue eyes of a man I knew I did not, would not, *could* not live without, I began to move up and down.

Slowly at first, rising until only the very tip of him was inside me, I then lowered my hips, recapturing the entire length of his cock one inch at a time. Kiel groaned, reaching up to grab my hips. His fingers dug in deep, and he began to bounce me off his hips. Faster and faster, my quads burning but held aloft by his insane strength, we fucked each other as hard as we could.

The meaty *thwack* of my ass on his thighs echoed like a crack with each thrust, and I bit my lip, keeping myself *mostly*

quiet. My arms were shaking. My legs were trembling. My pussy was throbbing, dripping wet all over him, until we were practically splashing it.

Neither of us cared. A dam had been broken, and it wasn't the one between my legs. Finally, *finally*, we had crossed what I hoped would be the final barrier. And in that moment of rough, carnal triumph, I would have let him do anything to me, fuck me any position, as long as I had him.

"I'm going to come again," he announced, his mouth opening wide.

"Me, too!" I cried as he literally fucked the orgasm out of me. I moaned loudly, unable to control myself as my walls clamped down around him.

It was more than he could take. His groan preceded the flood of heat as he filled me, sending it deep into my greedy pussy, filling me with a warmth that couldn't be replicated by anything else.

My legs couldn't take any more. I slid forward onto his chest, knees next to his abs, and just lay there, breathing hard, mind floating away in the fog of warmth that followed sex.

Beside us, the torch flickered and sputtered on its last legs.

I didn't care. The dark could come for us. Let it wrap us in its impenetrable embrace. I had all I needed in the world right there with me. I would enjoy the peace and closeness of that moment for as long as I—

Kiel sat up so abruptly that I fell off him with a yelp.

"*I've got it!*" he cried.

Chapter Nineteen

“What the hell are you talking about?” I asked from where I lay on my side, a rock poking my ribs as I looked up at his nude form. His every muscle was deliciously outlined in the dying light of the torch.

“Arcadia!” he said excitedly. “It’s the key!”

“The key to *what?*” I muttered, sitting up and brushing cave dust off my arm and side. “I don’t—*whoa!*”

The surprised cry came as Kiel snatched me by the arms and hauled me to my feet, stuffing my discarded robe into my hand as he hurriedly donned his own and grabbed the torch.

“Come on, get dressed, let’s go,” he said, urging me along faster.

A wet reminder of our earlier actions slid down the inside of my leg. That would be fun.

“Kiel, what’s going on? What are you talking about?”

He leaned down, kissing me without warning, his free hand grabbing the back of my neck and pulling me into it. My mouth opened as his tongue forced its way inside, my feet rising up on their tiptoes.

Then, just as suddenly, he was gone, pulling back, his eyes gleaming with energy and excitement.

“I’m sorry to cut this short,” he said. “But I know what we have to do.”

“You do?”

“Yes! Come on!” He grabbed my hand and started dragging me down the tunnel. “We have to get everyone else together!”

“I don’t suppose you care to tell me what it is?” I asked, tugging my hand free so I could properly tie the belt of my robe as we hurried through the mineshaft toward the cavern.

“Nope. I’ll tell everyone at once.”

“You suck,” I muttered playfully.

“My recent memory tells me otherwise,” he fired back, giving me a lewd look to emphasize his point.

I couldn't help it. I laughed, the sound ringing clearly in the tunnel. “Great. I've pushed past your barriers only to unlock your pervert side.”

“Jada, my darling, you have *no idea*,” he rumbled, a wicked smile on his lips.

I barely heard it, though. I was still stuck on the first part of what he'd said. What he'd *called me*. It was a breakthrough for sure, and one I wasn't sure he fully understood he'd made. The comment had just rolled out of him, and his focus had been on the sexual component. Not the term of endearment he'd so casually applied to me. Something he'd *never* done before.

The desire to point it out, to have him confirm he *had* said it, that I wasn't imagining it, was quite strong. Almost insatiable. I craved confirmation. I craved knowing he hadn't said it by mistake somehow.

He just fucked your brains out after telling you that you mean a lot to him and he wants you. Maybe don't push it?

I huffed loud enough to earn myself a questioning glance, but I waved it off. The last thing I needed was to let Kiel in on my internal thought process. If there were a way to lose a guy in ten minutes, that would be it. We'd just made huge progress. I had to accept it for what it was and let the rest come naturally. Without forcing it.

We ran through the common area and into the tunnel beyond. That was where the sleeping quarters began. A series of side-shafts had been blocked off with hung blankets, creating an illusion of privacy for the occupants.

“Andi! Clive!” Kiel barked. “We have work to do, let's go.”

There was a rustling, and the two of them emerged from behind a blanket. They were both wearing robes as well.

“What is it?” Andi asked, looking around in alarm. “Have we been found?”

“No, nothing like that,” Kiel assured. “But it is urgent.”

“What?” Clive asked as he saw me staring at him.

I smirked but just shook my head. It wasn't the time to address it. Not when I risked Andi's wrath by doing so.

“Whatever the big secret is,” I said, “it has to do with Arcadia. But he won't tell me anything.”

“What about it?” Andi asked.

“It's our target,” Kiel said. “I need a map. Meet me in the common room. Assemble anyone else you've come to rely on. We're going to need all the help we can get for this one.”

A few minutes later, I stood on the opposite side of a makeshift table assembled by shoving several crates together. Andi and Clive stood on the other side from me as Kiel unrolled a map of the entire Canis Empire. Two other shifters had gathered with us, Dante and Theo. According to Clive, they'd been instrumental in helping set things up.

“The Alphas are *here*,” he said, stabbing a finger at Lycaon. “Or they will be soon. All six of them. Lycaonus will make his way there once they free him. But in the meantime, all the power of the empire is concentrated here. Correct?”

“As far as we know,” I confirmed. “We're assuming the other Alphas all got the same message.”

“Seems like a safe assumption,” Kiel said. “And one I think we have to make. They're all holed up there behind the huge walls and thousands of soldiers.”

“So, what does that have to do with Arcadia?” Andi asked, pointing at the marking mostly south and a little east of the empire's capital.

“Arcadia is particularly vulnerable,” Kiel said eagerly. “Their Alpha isn't traveling. He's *dead*. Has been for over two months. Which means nobody is ruling the city. It's open. Vulnerable.”

“So?” Clive wanted to know.

Kiel smiled, looking around at his makeshift council. “So, we rule the city. We go in, toss out anyone loyal to the old

regime, and proclaim control of the city. We say no Alpha is welcome here and that the rebellion now controls it.”

I cleared my throat, buying time to figure out how to best address the absolute *audacity* of his plan.

“Okay. Let’s just, for one moment—and we’ll come back to this—*ignore* the troops still in the city. Pretend the Wulphere have abandoned it entirely or something. We go in, and we take over, as you said. What then? What does that accomplish?”

“It draws attention to us,” Kiel said. “The other Alphas, they won’t let that stand. They can’t allow us to defy them so openly like that.”

“So, they’ll send an army after us,” Andi said. “With enough troops to crush us.”

“Exactly!” Kiel said, pointing his finger at her.

I looked at him, then around the table. Everyone had the same confused expression that I was sure I wore. Eyebrows scrunched, lips flat, eyes wide. None of us were following.

“We don’t exactly have an army of our own,” I said as gazes started to turn my way, expecting me to be the one to shut down Kiel’s crazy plan. “I mean, even taking the city seems unlikely. If they send an actual army after us, a real, trained cohesive force, we won’t stand a chance at holding the city.”

“Aha,” Kiel said, grinning. “But that’s not the point. We don’t intend to hold the city. Our point is to draw the Alphas out of Lycaon. They won’t all come. One, maybe two, will be at the head of the army sent to crush us.”

“And it will crush us.”

“Not right away. They will siege us first,” Kiel said. “See if the citizens get angry and overthrow us or something. That’s when we hit them. From behind.”

“Again, the whole no army thing kind of prevents that,” I said with a helpless shrug.

“Not an attack,” Kiel said, his voice turning icy and dark. “We’re not after the army. We’re after the Alpha. We slip in

through the dark and kill him. Strike him down out there. Then we disappear. Leave the army confused and leaderless.”

“You think they’ll have their stone with them?” Clive asked thoughtfully.

“After learning what happened to Arcadus? Yes, I think they’re going to be extra paranoid,” Kiel said.

“You’re risking an awful lot on that assumption,” Theo pointed out.

“The entire rebellion is based on the assumption we can win,” Kiel countered. “It’s all we can do. But yes, you’re correct. There are an awful lot of holes in the plan. But it *can* work. Not to mention, I don’t have a better one.”

“None of us do,” I conceded, staring at the map. At my home, the city I’d grown up being attached to. Where all of this had started that night I tried to destroy the Fate Stone.

“You want us to take over a city. Lure an army to it. Then infiltrate that army and kill its leader, who will be surrounded by said army, and then escape?” Dante asked, regurgitating the plan in several short sentences.

“Yes,” Kiel said bluntly.

“That’s insane.” Dante shook his head in disbelief.

“Maybe,” Kiel agreed, fixing each of us with a stare. “But insane is not the same as impossible. We *can* do this. We *have* to do this. We can’t let Lycaonus reforge the stones. That would be the end of everything. I won’t stand around and let it happen. Who’s with me?”

Chapter Twenty

“This is a nice-looking boat,” I said, patting the deck on which we were crouched, feeling the smooth newness of the *filmore* tree planks that had gone into the construction. “I’m glad the rebellion’s money came through for you.”

Alann, captain of the brand-new fishing boat, which held nearly sixty concealed members of the rebellion, grinned at me, his hands on the wheel. “Try not to sink this one, will you? I just finished her shakedown trial last week.”

I smothered a laugh. Although it was unlikely to have drawn attention, I didn’t want to risk it. We were too close, our objective nearly in sight.

Glancing to my left, I could just barely see over the lip, where a second fishing boat joined ours. Three more were out there as well. Each one was crammed with members of the rebellion. Over three hundred men and women who believed enough in our cause to risk their lives on Kiel’s insane plan.

There were more, too, according to Alann. The city was ripe for the taking. We could expect others to rise up in support once it became known. Between the riots we’d instigated last time and the Alpha’s response—not to mention his *death*—people were asking questions and finding out they didn’t like the answers.

Which was how we’d managed to drum up so much support from the surrounding towns and bring it with us. Only about fifty of us had come direct from the mines. The rest were newcomers.

I just hope none of them are spies.

I shook my head. It was too late for that kind of thought. We were committed now. All of us. Not one of the “council” had voted against the plan in the end because we knew our time was limited, and we had to act. Now, we were minutes away from pulling up to the piers of Arcadia’s docks, setting the stage for the first real full-scale battle of the rebellion.

“You’re awfully calm,” I remarked to Kiel, who was crouched on my other side.

My hands were clammy, and sweat had plastered my hair—back to its silvery nature now that the makeshift dye of the *filmore* tree’s sap was washed out—to my neck. Even my stomach was getting in on the action, tying itself in knots and threatening to void itself of all contents, regardless of direction.

He only grunted in response.

“Can you see the future or something? Is that why? You know we’re going to succeed?”

He smiled, looking up from his own contemplative thoughts, letting me see into his eyes and showing me he wasn’t calm at all. He just had none of the outward signs of the extreme stress I was experiencing.

“No, not at all. Why do you ask?”

“You just seem to know this will succeed. That you think it can’t fail.”

“Oh, it can,” he said, causing several of the other fighters nearby to shift and stir. “But it won’t.”

“Why not?” I asked, hoping he knew what the hell he was saying. The last thing we needed was for people to start having doubts.

“Because they believe,” he said, thrusting his chin at the others, meaning the rebels who had joined our cause. Not just those on our ship, but on *all* the ships. “Finally, at long last, they *believe*, Jada. They can see things are changing, that they don’t *have* to listen. That there’s an alternative, something out there that speaks to the voice inside them that they’ve had to repress and ignore. The one saying things just don’t ‘feel’ right. Now, they know why. Now, they can do something with it.”

“There will be those who resist us, who resist that voice,” I said softly, not just referring to the Wulphere, either.

“I know,” he said sadly. “But there will *always* be those who resist. Who are too scared, who don’t understand, or who simply dislike change. We can’t *not* do what needs to be done because of them. Sometimes, violence is the only way for things to change.”

He took a deep breath, letting out his frustration as it started to get the better of him. I squeezed his arm, offering what comfort I could.

“I wish it wasn’t,” he added, loud enough for others to hear but not so loud his voice would carry. The docks were close enough I could hear the creaking of the boats tied to them as they gently bobbed in the water. “I don’t like it. I hate that it has to be that way. But it is, and we need to accept it.”

I leaned over and kissed his cheek. “I know. I feel sorry for them, too,” I told him, acknowledging what he was really getting at.

“If they want to surrender, we’ll let them,” he said. “But if they raise weapons against us ...”

“Then we’ll do what we have to do,” I said with quiet fierceness, accepting the reality of our situation.

“I hate that I have to ask that of others,” he said.

“I know,” I said as the captain barked orders at his crew as we came within spitting distance of the dock. Men stood ready with ropes to toss to waiting shore workers on the piers that sat below the level of the decks while the sails furled.

Kiel grunted, his muscles tensing. It was so close, almost time. Mere feet away.

“I just hope,” I whispered, “that we’ll be able to let go when it’s over. To put down the swords and stop the killing and go back to who we were. I don’t want to find myself longing for these days.”

It was as close as I’d ever come to voicing my concerns about our path. That I knew the killing was becoming easier and easier. I no longer had the same regrets, the same disdain for it, that I had when it had first started.

What if that never stopped? What if killing became *too* easy, and I found myself craving more? More fighting. More death.

“I don’t want to end up like *them*,” I said as the first ropes were hurled down to the docks.

“You won’t,” Kiel rumbled. “Because you’re a *good* person, Jada. You have a good heart.”

“And if I lose that?” I whispered. “If it becomes tainted?”

“You’re no longer immortal,” he said. “Someone will stop you, even if it’s time itself.”

“Good point,” I admitted as the ship came to a halt. “So, what now?”

“Now?” Kiel said, his voice rising as he stood. “Now, we take the next step in putting these bastards in the ground for good. Now, we take the city. *Remember, Arcadia waits for no one!*”

He finished in a bellow as he pulled his sword from his waist with one hand and vaulted over the edge of the ship with the other. I was right behind him.

A wordless, thunderous *roar* enveloped the ship, and sixty rebels, furious at having been lied to and deceived their entire lives, followed us over the edge and onto the docks, blasting past the stunned workers, a tidal wave of fury ready to vent itself on those who stood in the way of their quest for liberty.

I pitied any guard in armor who got in our way.

Chapter Twenty-One

A pair of guards watched us come at them, shocked into immobility. I reached them first and leveled my sword at them.

“Drop your weapons,” I growled.

Behind me, rebel fighters poured from the ships. Cries of “Free Arcadia” and “Death to the Tyrants” filled the docks. Sounds of fighting swiftly followed, including several screams that were cut off with sudden finality.

“Please,” I added as a half-dozen angry rebels squared up around me. “You don’t need to die here. Just surrender, and we won’t harm you. It doesn’t have to end this way.”

The guard to the left took in the assembled rebels and started to unbuckle his belt, recognizing the hopeless odds.

“*Traitor!*” the other hissed, pulling out a dagger and burying it in his comrade’s neck before any of us could react.

The helpless guard made a gurgling sound as blood fountained from the fatal wound. He fell to his knees as he tried and failed to stem the flow.

“That was a really stupid and unnecessary thing to do,” I growled. “You don’t stand a hope.”

“Better to die than to surrender to traitorous swine like you,” the guard sneered, pulling his sword free.

“This one is mine,” I told the rebels, a wave of fire filling my body at the senseless murder and betrayal.

The guard sneered and advanced at me, his sword held at the ready. I brought mine up, forcing myself to remember I didn’t actually have much training in the art of using a sword, while the guard was a full-fledged member of the Wulphere.

So, I cheated. I closed in on him, and as our swords clanged together, I spat in his face, momentarily blinding him. That gave me all the time I needed to disengage and drive the blade through the gape in his armor between stomach and thigh.

The guard screamed and fell to his knees, babbling in pain as I sliced through some *very* sensitive areas.

“Gutless piece of shit,” I growled at him. “You’re all that’s wrong with the empire.”

Then I pulled the blade free and drove the tip through his eye, ending the screams.

By the time I was done with him, the docks had been seized and cleared of all guards. The rebels had already moved into the market that lay beyond, taking it over. Armored bodies lay here and there, as did several others. The first casualties on our side.

Now that our force was assembled, the market was emptying at a rapid pace. Even the guards, seeing they were badly outnumbered, were retreating. A dozen or so were currently stripping themselves of their armor, surrendering to the inevitable.

I was glad to see we’d managed to avoid some needless death, though I was sure there would be plenty more before the day was done.

“Come on,” I said to my group of rebels, heading up one market street as the crowd fled before us.

However, not everyone left. Some stayed and watched us thoughtfully. Others asked what we were doing. Word began to spread that we’d come to liberate the city. To remove all those who were loyal to the Alphas.

And our numbers swelled because of it. Men and women, those who had realized the oppression under which they lived, stepped forward. Most were weaponless, but that didn’t matter. The swords from the dead or surrendered guards were distributed to those with experience. Others simply came along to help. Still more grabbed anything they could from the market that could be used as a weapon. I saw one shifter wielding a long curved blade meant for slicing fabric.

A surge of pride ran through me. We could do this. We could liberate the city.

“We have to get to the palace,” Kiel said from my left as we headed out of the market and up the city’s main thoroughfare. “That’s where the biggest cluster of guards will be. If we can take them out, the rest of the city will fall.”

Up the road, we went on a gentle incline. At the top was the palace that Arcadus had once ruled from. The stone walls beckoned, seemingly growing taller the closer we got.

A wall of armor greeted us, spilling forth from the gates and assembling into neat ranks outside the entrance. The front row drew swords, while the two ranks behind leveled spears at us, designed to keep us at bay while those in the front chopped us into bits.

We slowed, our mob spreading out wide and filling the street.

“Any ideas here?” I asked Kiel. Simply charging would be a death sentence. But guards continued to emerge from the palace, having come from other parts of the city.

Our forces slowly entered the square where the Wulphere waited. Filling at least half the main square, they’d advanced far enough to cut off our access from the side streets.

Before he could reply, something *clanged* off a piece of armor, loud enough to carry across the square.

“What the hell was that?” someone muttered.

Clang.

It happened again.

“Go away! We don’t want you here!”

Hundreds of eyes swiveled to a rooftop, where a young teen cocked his arm back and let fly a stone. It soared through the air, hitting a guard square in the head, making him stagger back.

Clang. Clang.

Those came from the other side of the formation. More youths on the rooftops, tossing whatever they could find at the

guards. The armored formation shifted, a ripple of unease, while a low growl ran through the mass of angry rebels.

The tide was turning, and the guards knew it.

Soon, there were dozens of civilians on the rooftops. While some threw chunks of stone and rock, others acted as bucket brigades to ferry more things to throw at the guards. Facing such an assault, the guards began to waver.

Kiel advanced. Just a single step.

We all advanced with him, only taking that single step.

The guards looked around, eyes and heads twisting, trying to understand what they were supposed to do.

A huge chunk of rock the size of someone's head soared over the crowd, sending one guard to the ground. The crowd roared in victory.

Kiel stepped forward again.

Our entire line followed. A straight line now. A singular front arrayed against the guards. It still wasn't as neat and orderly as our enemy, but it was far more organized than it had been. Behind it, others began lining up.

"Now!"

A veritable flurry of huge pieces of rock and stone and pots and anything heavy and hard rained down on the left flank of the guards, rocking them. The formation came apart. Only for a second, but it was enough. The rebels smashed into the line, closing the distance before the Wulphere could recover.

Everything came apart as guards tried to protect themselves. But the attacks were now coming from all around them as rebels crossed through their lines.

That wasn't to say it was bloodless. Many rebels died in the frenzy. But not as many as would have without the help of the citizens of Arcadia. Ordinary people standing up for what they believed in. Those were the true victors in our fight.

"It's done," Kiel said half an hour later, his chest heaving from exertion. He sported two nasty-looking cuts on his chest

and right arm, but he barely seemed to notice. Meanwhile, his sword dripped blood. I was sure the entire square was coated in it, the stones dark.

We'd won, but nobody was celebrating. There was too much death to feel like shouting out in glee.

"What about the guards on the walls?" I asked.

"They're either surrendering or fleeing. Some even asked to join our side," he said.

"Maybe there's hope for them after all," I said, glancing over at where another knot of Wulphere stood, most of their armor gone or marked with white to signify they'd changed sides. Not many, but there were some.

"There's always hope," Kiel said, resting a hand on my shoulder. "Don't ever forget that. No matter how hard things get."

"I won't," I promised, gripping his hand, holding on to it, reveling in it. "Now comes the hard part. Waiting for their response."

"Eventually," he said. "But there's something you must do before that."

I frowned. "What? We have the city. I did everything I was supposed to do."

"Not that," Kiel said. "But your parents are here still, Jada. Living in the safehouse. You should find them. Talk to them. To your mother."

Right. The mother who'd lied to me.

Chapter Twenty-Two

I stared at the plain brown wood door. The nondescript rectangle was no different from any of hundreds of others in the city. The gray stone building was just another of hundreds, built along the same lines and the same simple, blocky style. There was nothing special about the house itself. Only what it contained.

People wandered the street, minding their business. Few glanced at me as I leaned heavily against the building across the street, watching the door. Trying to decide whether I wanted to go over and tap out the pattern Andi had given me to let the occupants know it was safe to answer. Five minutes turned into half an hour.

What would I say? What *could* I say?

Can't say anything if you're a coward who doesn't even knock.

Pushing off the wall with an elbow, I went for the door, threading my way past bystanders until I stood in front of it. From there, I could see the lines of the *filmore* tree planks used in the door's construction. Some of the brown stain was flaking off. I picked at a large chunk, flicking it free.

It would be better to just get it over with. No more idling and wasting time. Just do it.

Taking a deep breath, I knocked, then waited impatiently, telling my knees the entire time that they'd better stay locked. I wasn't the one who had to explain themselves.

The door opened.

"*Jada?*" my father exclaimed. "Is it really you?"

"Hi, Dad," I said, letting him gather me in a hug. I patted him on the back, but my eyes were on my mother, who was still coming to the door. "It's good to see you."

"You, too. Come in, come in, before anyone sees you."

"It's fine," I said, entering. "The city is free now."

“All that commotion we heard?” my dad asked, looking past me and out into the streets with a suspicious frown as if he didn’t believe me.

“That was us,” I said. “We tossed out the last of the Wulfhere. For now.”

“For now?”

“It’s a long story,” I said, patting him on the shoulder, still looking at my mother.

“Jada,” she said with a smile, coming toward me. Yet she didn’t run to gather me in a hug either.

Could she know why I was there?

“Hi,” I said awkwardly. “We need to talk.”

“We do?” she asked. “About what?”

“Don’t,” I said, my voice thickening as I shook my head. “Just don’t. I know the truth. Kiel told me.”

The blood drained from her face.

My dad finished closing the door and was looking between us, pure confusion on his face.

“He doesn’t know?” I asked, staring at my mother.

It started with her shoulders, then moved to her face, her entire body sagging in defeat. She knew what this was all about. Any last confusion had left her.

“I don’t know what?” he said.

“Later,” I said as gently as I could, patting him on the shoulder. “Okay?”

“Um, okay,” he said. “The city is safe, you said? Why don’t I go to the market, then. Leave you two to talk.”

“Thanks,” I said, still not looking at him.

He made another curious noise, then busied himself with leaving. The entire time, my mother and I just stared at one another. Neither said a word until long after he had left.

“Jada—”

“You lied.”

The two words cut through whatever she was going to say, silencing her. Her eyes glittered with unshed tears. She wanted to speak, I knew, but I wasn't done. I had to get it out, get all my feelings out, or I knew I might never find the courage to speak it.

“You lied about everything,” I said. “How? How could you do it? You literally *made a child* to serve the rebellion.”

A choked-back sob was the only sound she made.

“I—I don't know if I'm disgusted with you or impressed by your dedication to the cause, if I want to disown you, or maybe I'm all of the above.” Somehow, I kept myself from yelling. “Why would you never tell me any of this? Why hide it?”

Trembling, my mother drew a long, slow breath in, same as I'd done before crossing the street. Not that I doubted I was her daughter. We looked too much alike for *that* to ever be in doubt.

“I should have,” she whispered.

“You're damn right you should have!” That time, I yelled, unable to hold it back. “Why didn't you?”

“I fell in love,” she said with a helpless shrug. “With your father. He's my mate, Jada. I love him, and I didn't want to put any pressure on him or you. You're my daughter.”

“That you had because you wanted a weapon.”

“I had an ulterior motive for getting together,” she said, standing up straight. “Yes, that's true. But you are my daughter, and don't you for a *second* think you were unwanted as my child as well or that you were ever not loved. Any plans faded as things between your father and I became real.”

“And what about me? Why not tell me?”

She sighed. “Because I'm your mother, Jada, and that changed everything. I wanted to shelter you. To keep you safe. Kiel swore to me that he would never force me to give you up, that you would never be forced into joining. It was all

voluntary. You had to *choose* it. And until your Fate Night, you never showed any sort of interest in the idea. So, I didn't tell you, and I tried to let you live your life as Jada, without anyone else's expectations on you."

I looked away.

"I tried to do right by you, Jada, because I *love you*."

"If I wasn't here," I said softly, staring past her at a blank spot on the wall, "if you hadn't forced me into being, then Lanna would still be alive. Because I wouldn't have killed her."

The tears faded, replaced by a colder, more judgmental look.

"Do you feel better now?" she asked in a tone just as frigid.

"Huh?"

"Do you feel better? Does accusing someone of being the cause of their own daughter's death make you feel less guilty?" She held up her hand sharply, cutting me off. "I'm well aware Lanna wasn't mine biologically, but don't you *dare* insinuate I didn't love her as one. You know better than that."

The caustic tone pushed me back a half step.

"Her death is not on my hands any more than it is yours," she said, the sternness slowly melting away. "Lanna wouldn't hold it against you, so please, Jada, stop holding it against yourself. Before it kills you, too. I can't lose you both."

You lost me the day I found out the truth.

The words jumped out in my mind. A petty, vengeful part of me wanted to say them out loud, to really stick the knife in deep and *twist*, but I didn't. I kept my mouth shut. Because I knew that whatever may have happened to bring her and my father together, whatever motives there were, she *had* loved us both, and we had both lost someone to the ice that day.

"I'm still angry," I said instead, biting each word off. "My entire life has been a lie, built on a foundation of lies. It's like everyone in the background has known who I am and what

I'm expected to do except for me. And you were a *part* of that."

"I know," she said with that soft tenderness mothers possess for their children. I didn't even think she meant to, given the situation. It was just automatic. "And I understand if you never want anything to do with me again. But your father had nothing to do with it."

That cost her a lot to say. Giving me permission to sever ties with her and essentially promising me that she wouldn't try to reach out or mend bridges if that was what I chose.

"You'll tell him," I said stiffly. "That's not on me. That's on you."

"I will," she promised. "But whatever you decide, Jada, know one thing: I never, ever, *ever* faked or forced how much I love you. How happy I am to be your mother. How *proud* you have made me, both before all of this and since. Seeing you grow into the woman and adult you are now gives me a fierce pride I will *never* let go of. No matter what you say. Remember that."

I sniffed, blinking rapidly against the sudden burst of extra fluid in my eyes.

"I will," I promised her. "But right now, I think I need to be alone."

I left the house without saying another word. Wondering if I could ever go back.

Chapter Twenty-Three

It took thirteen days for the Alphas to respond.

“When they do something, they certainly do it big, don’t they?” I murmured, leaning against the rough-hewn stone of the top of the wall that protected the city.

Kiel grunted next to me as we looked at the response unfold around the landward side of Arcadia. “Something like that.”

Thousands upon thousands of Wulphere marched in ranks, pouring down the road from Lycaon, spreading out around the walls of our city to begin the siege. Their armor shone brightly in the mid-day sunshine, the steel polished to a perfect shine. Troop leaders bawled orders, directing units to their camps.

Squads of wolves patrolled, loping along easily and darting between the thick formations of soldiers, though mostly sticking to the edges so as not to interfere with the army’s assembly. Banners waved gaily in the air, marking various command tents as they were erected.

“Did you see your mother again?”

I sighed, pointing out over the wall. “Look at all of them,” I said. “That’s a huge-ass army, Kiel. And it’s here for *us*.”

“You really need to make things right with her,” Kiel said, not accepting my change of subject.

Though he did stare over the wall with a sharp gaze. He knew as well as I did that things could go really badly in an instant if we let it. We had to stay on guard.

Given his focus on our enemy, my irritated glare went unnoticed, becoming a waste of energy.

“Well?” he prompted.

I sighed. It was only slightly dramatic and over the top. “I don’t know *how*, okay?”

Kiel’s snort turned into a low chuckle.

“And what’s so damn funny to you, hmm, mister?” I challenged, putting hands on my hips, momentarily ignoring the huge army.

“Can you seriously not see it?” he asked, his shoulders bouncing slightly.

“See *what*?” I growled, starting to get irritated with him.

“Not so long ago, I told you something about myself,” he said, turning his head at last, his gaze grabbing mine in an intense exchange. “I told you who I really was. My real name, my past. It’s not an easy thing to swallow, and I expected you to disown me. Instead, you didn’t give a damn. You actually yelled at me to tell me that *I’m wrong* about who I am. You didn’t even give it a second thought!”

I shook my head, hair flying. “You’re wrong.”

He arched his eyebrows. “Oh, am I?”

“Yes. I gave it plenty of second thought. Lots and *lots* of further thought.”

“And you still told me I was wrong.”

“Of course I did,” I said. “But I’d had plenty of time to see who you really were. To realize you weren’t the person who ...”

Kiel looked at me intensely. He was trying to drive home his point, using what I’d said. I replayed my last words.

“*Oh*,” I said as it sank in, becoming clear as day.

“You’ve had decades to do that with your mother, Jada. Years and years to see your mother isn’t the evil person you’re making her out to be,” he chided. “You know better, but you’re choosing to ignore it.”

“Because she actively *lied* to me,” I pointed out.

“So did I!” he cried, throwing his hands in the air.

“It’s different.”

“It’s not.”

“Yes, it is. You lied about yourself. Sort of. You never really said you *weren't* him, and besides, there were hints about your past. Things you could do. There was evidence to prove you weren't telling us everything about yourself.”

He shook his head, ready to continue his argument, but I beat him to it.

“Kiel, she lied about *me*. She hid who I was and why I even exist. That's a bit different.”

“No, it's not,” he said firmly. “You're twisting it. Accept it and *move on*. That's your mother, and if you think she doesn't love you like any other mother, then you're nowhere near as smart as I thought you were.”

I leaned back. “That's kind of harsh, don't you think?”

“A bit hypocritical to be saying that when you're currently cutting out your mother, don't you think?” he challenged.

“Why are you being like this?” I asked, hurt. “I thought you and I were ... a whatever we are. A thing.”

“That's *why* I'm pushing you like this!” he half-shouted. “Don't let your ego blind you to the fact that I'm trying to *help you* by telling you that you're overreacting.”

I froze, taken aback by his outburst. It was so unlike Kiel that I needed a moment to process what he was saying and how he was saying it. Was I letting my ego, or any other part of myself for that matter, blind me?

“I can't just forget,” I said. “You can't ask me to do that. She *did* lie, Kiel. No matter what you say. No matter how serious you say it is or isn't, she *did* lie.”

“As if parents are perfect,” he said. “Did you *never* lie to her? Never try to hide actions you regretted and hoped she wouldn't find out about?”

A memory swam up of a broken window and cutting a branch off the *filmore* tree as a scapegoat instead of the angrily thrown book that had caused the damage.

“Maybe,” I said, looking anywhere but at him.

“We’ve got to go deal with *this*,” he said, waving a hand broadly at the Wulfhere army. “Before we do, *set things right with her*. Trust me, if you don’t, you’ll regret it. Especially if it doesn’t work out. Don’t let whatever you told her be the last thing you said to her.”

I leaned heavily against the wall, considering the callout I’d just received at the hands of my man.

“There,” Kiel said, pointing into the distance and gracing me with a change of subject. “See that banner? The one with the red stripe.”

Following his finger, I was easily able to pick it out. It was twice the size of any of the others, as was the tent going up around it.

“Yeah. That’s got to be one of them, right?”

“Nycitus,” Kiel said with a thoughtful *hmm*.

“Why’s that so interesting?” I asked. “Good or bad?”

“Not sure,” he admitted as we watched the tent go up. “He’s the most warlike, but just as arrogant as Lycaonus. Which could be a benefit or a detriment.”

“A little over the top, don’t you think?” I asked as the pavilion took shape.

Kiel grunted his agreement.

The Alpha’s tent was a large octagon, standing twice as high as any other command tent, let alone the soldiers’ sleeping tents. It also had two smaller wing-like structures attached to it by short tubes of canvas. Each of the smaller hexagons could have slept thirty with ease, while the center pylon could probably hold triple digits with room to spare.

“Could make things more difficult,” I said as a thought hit me. “Won’t know which one he sleeps in.”

“We’ll just have to deal with it. Nothing we can do about that.”

“When do we hit them?”

“Tonight, I think,” he said calmly. “They won’t expect us to try anything right away, and it’ll be the most disorganized as everyone settles into their roles and routines. The guards will be the most alert, but if we wait any longer, we risk them coming for the city first.”

“Tonight it is, then,” I said.

“Which leaves you several hours to find your mother and make things right,” he pointed out, returning to the original subject. “Just hug her, if nothing else. The rest will sort itself out.”

“You won’t stop bothering me until I do, will you?”

He shook his head, one corner of his mouth turning up.

“Fine,” I said, pushing off the wall and brushing past him, heading for the stairs down. “If it makes you happy.”

“*You* make me happy,” he growled with such unexpected possessiveness that I nearly fell headfirst down the stairs. “But I’m not doing this for me. I’m doing it for you.”

“Um, okay,” I said, heart suddenly racing.

He winked, then made a shooing motion to push me on my way. I managed to make it down the stairs without my legs giving out, though I didn’t know how.

You make me happy.

The words were cemented in my head. The walk through the city to my parents’ safehouse was like a dream.

I made him happy.

“Jada, hi,” my dad said as he pulled open the door following my knock.

I accepted his somewhat tentative hug, squeezing back hard, letting him know it was okay. That we were good. He returned the grip, some of his tension fading.

“Is Mom around?” I asked.

“She’s in the back,” he said, giving me an inquisitive look. “Do you want me to go for a walk again?”

“Did she tell you?”

He nodded. “Yes.”

“How do you feel?” I asked, curious about his thoughts.

“I love her.”

It was all he said. For him, it was enough.

“Me, too,” I said softly as my mom came into the main room, hanging back to give me space.

I slipped away from my dad and walked over to her. There were a lot of words I could say. Things that probably still *needed* to be said, to be worked out.

But knowing what was coming, the dangers of the path I walked, meant those things could wait. At the moment, what was important was family and loved ones. My anger would fade in time. Eventually, so would she. When that time came, I knew I would hate myself forever if I didn't try to move past it.

So, I put my arms out and gave my mom a hug. Both of us were crying. It was ugly. My dad stood nearby, twiddling his thumbs and trying not to make a very “Dad” remark.

It was perfect.

Eventually, my mom pulled back, though she kept her grip on my shoulders. Her eyes brimmed with tears, and my shirt was definitely damp in places. So was hers, for that matter.

“You're leaving again,” she said.

“Yes,” I told her. “Tonight. We ... Well, it's the next stage of our plan.”

Biting her lip, she nodded and glanced past me at my dad.

“It's dangerous, isn't it?” he asked.

“Nothing is safe these days,” I answered. “But doing nothing would be the most dangerous of all. If we do that, they win.”

My mom chewed on her lip, then nodded, pulling me back into a hug.

“Be safe, my Jada,” she whispered. “I love you.”

“I love you, too, Mom. I always will.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

“Stop pouting.”

I glared at Clint. “I’m not pouting. I’m pacing. There’s a huge difference. Pouting would mean I’m upset and mad for no good reason. Pacing is a thing I do to burn off nervous energy.”

Clint mimed falling asleep. “Thank you, teacher.”

I slugged him in the arm. Hard. He pulled away with a sour look.

“Now who’s pouting?” I said, lifting a finger in his direction.

“Children,” Andi muttered from a nearby log, which served as a backrest to her seated position. “I’m fighting a war with children.”

Clive and I looked at each other, then as one, we plopped ourselves in front of her cross-legged, putting on our most eager expressions.

“Please, old and wizened one,” I pleaded innocently, “tell us the stories of the old days. Oh, you of advanced age and serious senility, please, enlighten us to the journeys we will face as we slowly but surely descend into the crippling pain of turning *twenty-five*.”

Andi’s glare had been fixed on me the entire time, but at the very end, it shot to my left as Clint snickered. There was a very audible *gulp* as he sat up straight at her look, his laughter dying.

Which, of course, set me off, clamping both hands over my face as I giggled at the byplay. Although the two hadn’t said a single word—or even hinted at it—the change between them was obvious. I wasn’t sure if it was a physical arrangement of convenience or something more. But until they brought it out into the open, I’d sworn to myself I wouldn’t bring it up.

But watching the “oh, shit” look cross his face was more than I could take. I’d never seen Clive succumb to a woman before. Knowing Andi, however, I suspected I would enjoy it.

We weren’t the only ones blowing off steam as we waited, either. Little groups of men and women had clustered together. Our voices were pitched low, although there was no real danger of being detected. We were over five miles north of the battle line, tucked deep into the forest in a small ravine. All of which meant any sound would be hard-pressed to carry far.

But there was still risk, so we talked in whispers.

“How much longer do you think?” Clive asked, looking at me.

“Why do you think I would know? He’ll be back when he’s finished scouting and not a moment before,” I said with a shrug.

“I don’t know,” Clive said. “I just thought maybe you would know. Since you and he are, you know ...”

I leaned forward, pinning him with a stare. “Since he and I are *what?*”

Clive opened his mouth to say something. As he did, I flicked my eyes to Andi and then back. It happened in a split second, almost too fast to catch in the darkness, but Clive saw. He knew what that meant.

“Together,” he said with a cough. “What I meant to say was you’re together.”

I was pretty sure he’d meant to say something *far* more vulgar. But I let it slide, lifting my nose in the air to show I could be the bigger person.

“More seriously, I’d suspect he’ll be back very soon,” I said, shifting my butt to move a stone that had been poking me.

“What makes you say that?”

I pointed behind Clive, where a wolf as black as night had just emerged from the forest into the open area occupied by our strike team.

A moment later, Kiel stood where the wolf had been. His eyes found mine, and our gazes locked briefly before he gestured for everyone to circle up.

“Okay, listen up. Good and bad news,” he said as our twenty-person team assembled.

“Bad news first, please,” I said.

“All right. Bad news. You aren’t done getting wet.”

Several of the others groaned. Our way *out* of Arcadia had involved making our way down to the pier in total darkness, slipping into the water, and swimming out into the impenetrably black waters of Lake Arcadia, guided by nothing but a slick, algae-covered rope.

The ship had then set sail, sneaking us out from under the noses of Nycitus’ army. We’d sailed north, far up the coast, where we’d then been released to run halfway back. Then Kiel had gone ahead to scout the enemy lines. From our current position, it should have been a straight shot to the army. There wasn’t even a river in our way.

“What do you mean?” I asked. “We have to get back on the boat?”

A low rumble reached our ears, muted by the thick canopy of the *filmore* trees.

Kiel pointed upward toward the sky beyond the leafy coverings. “Storm is coming in. It’s gonna be a big one.”

“That’s good,” Andi said. “It’ll help mask us. Everything will smell like wet wolf.”

“It will also mask the scouts, making them harder to find,” Kiel said. “The storm is coming in from the west as usual, so neither side has a wind advantage. We’ll have to make sure we don’t miss a single one.”

“Did you find their positions?” I asked.

“I think so.”

He proceeded to outline the approach to the camp. As expected, very few guards were posted *behind* the encircling

army. Nycitus' arrogance was working for us. They all figured we were inside the city.

Don't fall for the same trap, though. Overconfidence goes both ways.

After the briefing, Kiel handed out movement orders, and everyone began to shift and filter out into the forest to begin the journey southward for our next strike against the Alphas.

A flicker of excitement I couldn't dampen flowed through me. Jitters about the impending combat, perhaps? It was impossible to know for sure.

I walked over to Kiel once the clearing had emptied and flung my arms around him in a hug. He held me tight, and for several far-too-short moments, it was just him and me, and nothing else mattered.

"After this is over, I—"

Kiel cut me off with a kiss that stole my breath and burned its way through my system, lighting fires wherever his skin touched mine and leaving behind a pulsing ache, an invisible reminder of the intensity of his touch.

"We'll talk when it's over," he said, pressing his forehead to mine, looking deep into my eyes.

"Okay," I replied shakily.

"For now, it's time to go." He kissed me again briefly, then stepped back.

His body changed, returning to the huge black-furred beast that stood nearly to my breasts. The yellow eyes glowed in the dark as he shook himself down.

My wolf came charging out as well, changing my body, shifting it into my other form. Hands became paws, nails became claws. Joints reversed, and my face elongated forward.

The night swam into incredible detail. Although I benefited from slight night vision in my human form, my wolf eyesight was far superior. Not to mention my hearing.

My ears pricked at a rumble of thunder. Somewhere else in the forest, an animal squeaked in fear. The wind rustled branches high above, only the strongest of gusts reaching the forest floor.

Kiel stole forward, a shadow as silent as the night, and I followed, my fur the complete opposite, a bright white, brilliant and unhidden. Opposites in every way, but nonetheless, drawn to one another.

On we ran through the forest, across fields and over hills, flowing with speed and stealth, to complete a mission that would further change the face of the Canis Empire.

Would there even *be* a Canis Empire once we were done? If we succeeded and Lycaonus and the other Alphas were destroyed forever, what would happen? Who—or what—would take the place of the former immortals?

I didn't know, and I didn't have the time to care. My focus had to be on the there and then. If it wasn't, we would never be able to answer those questions.

Because we would all be dead.

Kiel slowed as we reached the outer band of defenses.

Lightning split apart the sky, revealing a pair of wolves no more than twenty feet in front of us. Side by side, they walked the trail as we looked down from the hill above.

Rain followed, a sudden torrent that muffled all other sounds as we fell upon the luckless patrol, overwhelming them in seconds. Kiel indicated that the two of our number who looked most like the enemy wolves should stay. They would hide the bodies and do their best to ensure nobody realized something had happened.

The rest of us ran onward, the same scenario playing out twice more until we were within striking distance of the lines. Once there, Kiel and I shifted while the others fanned out to ensure nobody detected us as we worked.

We crept up the gentle slope toward the back of the command pavilion, the rain soaking our skin and plastering our hair to our heads. There had been no way to figure out

which part was Nycitus' sleeping quarters, so we took a guess and headed for the rightmost outer tent.

Low to the ground, we untied one of the stakes, creating just enough slack to shimmy our way under the edge of the tent. Doing so in near silence took far longer than I'd have liked. Each moment as I crawled forward, stomach flat to the ground, was a thunderous crescendo in my mind, the hammering of the rain on the tent mixed with the roar of my pulse to create a cacophony I couldn't believe didn't wake everyone nearby.

The rain poured over the edge of the tent, creating a miniature waterfall for me to crawl through. Far too much of it ended up *inside* the tent, but there was nothing to be done about it.

Once I was in and could haul my legs after me, I looked around, breathing a silent sigh of relief. We were in a storage area. Trunks and bags were piled high, stacked neatly and in organized piles.

A piece of fabric was strung up, separating half of the tent from the other. Curious, I stole to the edge where it met the outer wall and peeked through.

My heart stopped. A quintet of guardsmen all slept on cots on the far side, swords next to them, ready to be swept up at an instant's notice. Gently, I backed away before the roar of my furiously beating heart woke them up. Grabbing Kiel's attention as he finished sliding under the tent, I held a finger to my lips and raised five fingers, pointing to the other side.

He cursed silently and nodded. There was nothing to be done about it at that point. Padding forward, we slipped out of the storage area, moving as fast as possible toward the canvas hallway between the sections of the command pavilion.

I rolled my eyes as I entered the middle section.

There, on a huge bed that had absolutely *no place* in a military camp, slept the commanding Alpha. Nycitus was on his back, mouth open slightly, breathing heavily but not snoring.

No guards could be seen *inside* the tent as lightning flashed outside. However, Kiel and I could make out four guards outside the room, two posted on either side of the door.

With frayed nerves, we moved across the floor, the thick covering of rugs muffling our footsteps. Our target had no idea we were in his sleeping chamber, mere feet away from his body. The blade next to his bed would be his downfall.

As long as we found his stone. I'd fully agreed with Kiel that there was no way the Alphas would let the stones out of their sight. Not after Arcadus. But if Nycitus *did* have his, it wasn't anywhere that we could easily see.

Cursing, knowing each second we wasted brought us closer to discovery and, thus, failure, I searched around for it, trying to move in utter silence. If Nycitus woke up, it was all over.

I'd just about given up hope, turning a glaring eye on the sleeping form, when lightning once more lit up the sky. The *crack* of thunder was almost immediate, indicating the storm was almost right above us.

Kiel and I froze, our eyes focused on the bed, but Nycitus slept through it, much to our relief. On the other side of the open area, Kiel resumed his search. My eyes, however, never left the bed. Not the figure sleeping in it, but *under* it, where, in the brief moment of light, I'd seen a wooden chest.

Creeping forward, I ever so slowly eased the box out from under the bed, doing my best not to move too quickly. A lock hung off one side, and I was certain that if it banged against the wood, the noise would alert Nycitus.

Kiel was at my side once he saw what I had and helped me carry the box away from the bedside. I pointed angrily at the lock. Forcing it open would be too loud. The guards, not to mention Nycitus himself, would be alerted and on us in seconds.

Which meant I needed the key.

Knees shaking, hands clammy, I crept back toward the sleeping Alpha, swallowing a lump in my throat. He wouldn't let the key get far.

My heart sank as I approached the bedside, staring down at him. His long hair was mussed around his head, the sheets pulled up just past his stomach, revealing the thick muscular upper body of an Alpha who took his fitness seriously, even in immortality. But that wasn't where my sense of failure came from.

It was from the necklace he wore. The one with a key instead of a pendant. There was no *way* we could get that off him without waking him.

I crept back to Kiel and the box, using hand gestures to indicate the key was around Nycitus' neck. Motioning for me to stay put, Kiel went over to the Alpha. Then, before I could say anything, he drew the dagger from where it hung off the bedpost and drove it through the Alpha's eye.

A second later, the key was arcing through the air toward me. The Alpha was as "dead" as I'd been when the Nehringi ran me through with a sword. It wouldn't take long for him to heal and wake up.

Catching the key, I put it in the lock, remembering to still move silently, so the guards wouldn't hear a thing. The rain had drowned out the sound of the knife piercing its way into the brain, but metal on metal carried much farther.

The box popped open, and I smiled in triumph as a green glow lit the darkness. Grabbing one of the rugs, I wrapped the stone in the center, folding the corners around it. Kiel, meanwhile, was busy sawing away as quietly as possible, slicing open Nycitus' throat. That way, even if the Alpha did wake up, he wouldn't be able to shout for help.

Stone contained, I grabbed Nycitus' sword, then slowly pushed it into the ground, until only the very bottom of the handle protruded, perhaps six or seven inches of steel.

This had better work, I mouthed at Kiel, swinging the stone-filled sack around my back.

Nycitus awoke, the movement startling Kiel long enough for the Alpha to bat the weapon away. His eye and throat

poured blood and other fluids, but that didn't matter. Normally, he would heal. Unfortunately for him, that day wasn't normal.

Whipping the sack around, I slammed it down on top of the handle of the sword.

As the stone shattered, green light and energy erupted outward. I smiled in triumph. The energy shot upward, taking the entire command tent with it.

"Run!" Kiel hissed, fur already sprouting across his face.

Cursing silently, I followed suit and, seconds later, was following him as we raced for the edge of the camp and the perceived safety of the forest beyond. Behind us, guards shouted in alarm as the entire camp awoke in an uproar as they tried to figure out what had happened.

Hot on the heels of the rest of our strike team, Kiel and I ducked into the forest and ran as fast as we could. We wouldn't stop until the following night had fallen, putting as much distance as possible between us and the chaos that was likely to follow the death of the Alpha.

Despite the still present danger, I let a big wolfy smile twist my features as we ran. We had done it. A second Alpha was dead, his stone shattered, and another piece of Fate was freed.

Now, we just had to stop Lycaonus before it was too late.

Chapter Twenty-Five

We stepped slowly from the edge of the forest as it came to an end, transforming from lush undergrowth and verdant greenery to a few scraggly things that anyone would be hard-pressed to call trees. We'd run for at least half a day and now looked upon the rocky plains leading to the base of the northern mountains.

The sun shone overhead, beating heavily on us as we left the leafy shade. My white fur shed most of the heat, but I imagined Kiel would quickly overheat. I tested the air, searching it for signs of water—a river or lake he could use to dunk himself in and keep cool. The day would only get warmer, so it was better to be pragmatic about it.

Nuzzling up against the larger midnight-furred beast until we were flank to flank, I motioned my head in the direction of the water. A break would be good for us, and in the ever-increasing elevations near the base of the mountains where we were, the water was likely to be fresh and cool.

Nycitum was not far. As close as we were to the City of Hammers—as it was nicknamed for its mighty forges—a half an hour or so extra wouldn't change anything. Besides, it would do well for us to go over our plan.

Or come up with one at all.

In our chaotic flight from the army encampment outside of Arcadia, we hadn't slowed long enough to discuss what our next steps would be. Everyone *else* had their instructions and were expected to carry them out. However, for the two of us, all we'd had was “go north to Nycitum and stop Lycaonus.” That was it. Nothing more concrete or laid out.

Kiel resisted. He pawed at the ground, making soft noises. He wanted to push on, to put more ground under us.

I made it clear that we *were* going to stop before we reached the city, and he didn't fight me on that, so I loped after him as we crossed a rocky field, moving up a hill and then down into a ravine. Our heads swung left and right, keeping watch for

any others who might be in the vicinity. It wasn't unusual within the empire to see pairs or even groups of wolves moving through the countryside, but that was during normal times.

Given all that had happened, I expected the Alphas to be on high alert, which meant increased patrols and a high likelihood that anyone we saw in the countryside would be hostile.

We crossed the next ridgeline, dipping down the other side and veering off to the left toward a freshwater stream. In the distance, the city of Nycitum loomed large. Built right up against the base of the mountain and reaching halfway up, Nycitum was constructed in tiers that decreased in size as they went up. A thousand holes were bored into the mountain as mighty forges burned day and night to build all manner of tools and implements needed in the ever-growing population of the Canis Empire.

At the top of it all was the Grand Forge. Where the Fate Stones were created. That was our target. Destroy the only forge capable of creating something that could bind Fate, stopping Lycaonus' plan in its tracks.

My eyes followed the levels of white stone up until they landed on the highest level. I studied it as if I could come up with a plan that would succeed from where we stood.

As I examined it, my heart skidded to a stop.

No. It couldn't be.

Kiel noticed my slowing and turned back to come nuzzle my face, urging me to keep moving, to get off the ridgeline and out of sight in a stream below. But I didn't move, instead jerking my muzzle at the city. I hoped I was seeing things, but the lightning-fast shiver that ran through him told me he saw it, too.

Snarling, he turned and trotted toward the water's edge. I followed, shifting back once I was out of sight.

I sat on a rock, hands automatically fiddling with my hair, twisting it and pulling it apart, over and over again. Anything to keep them busy.

“That was faster than expected,” Kiel grunted as he walked forward into the shallow stream and sat down to fully immerse himself in the cold water.

After a moment, I went in after him, lowering myself into his lap.

“Lycaonus is there,” I said flatly. “That’s his flag flying above the city next to Nycitus.’ Isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is,” Kiel said, confirming it instead of doing as I’d hoped and telling me I’d imagined it. “They must have dug him out of the mountain.”

“Damn,” I cursed. “We needed more time. If he’s there, and the Alphas are there ...”

Kiel nodded. “Then he may very well have already started binding the shards of fate into the swords.”

“What do we do *now*?” I asked plaintively, leaning my head against his shoulder.

Thick arms wrapped around me, warm despite the chilly mountain waters flowing over us. Kiel held me tight and kissed the top of my head. He knew I wasn’t complaining to be petulant. I was simply frustrated. We were trying to do the right thing, and the world kept conspiring to make things harder and harder for us.

“We have to stop him,” Kiel grunted, his chest rumbling with the vibrations of his words.

“But our original plan goes out the window, doesn’t it? Infiltrating the city and destroying the Grand Forge is pointless if he’s already made the swords.”

“And maybe he hasn’t,” Kiel said. “Maybe it takes time. If he’s only gotten one done and we destroy the forge, then we prevent another five from being made.”

“That’s true,” I conceded.

Kiel’s chest rose and fell a little extra before he spoke again. “It has to be done. In the end ... If necessary, destroying that forge comes before myself. I will do it.”

Alone, he meant.

“No,” I said, straddling him. In any other situation, the two of us naked, my legs spread around him, would have been hyper-sexual. But not then. “You will not. This is not some damn martyr mission.”

Kiel’s features softened. “Jada ...”

“I said *no*,” I snarled in his face, shutting his protest down. “Get that out of your head right now.”

“The truth of it is—”

“The *truth*,” I growled, leaning forward until my face was inches from his, “is that you’re looking for some grand gesture, something that will help you ‘undo the past’ or whatever horseshit line you’re going to use to convince me. Well, it won’t work. Do you know why?”

“Why?” he asked wryly, not—*quite*—smiling.

“Because you’ve spent the past few centuries doing that.”

“But—”

My hand clamped over his mouth. “No buts. Everyone tells me I have to let my guilt over Lanna’s death go. Including you. So, you don’t get to be a hypocrite here, understand?”

Kiel cocked his head to the left, indicating he wanted to speak. I pulled my hand away.

“So, *have* you forgiven yourself for that?”

“Not yet,” I said. “But I’m working hard to not blame myself for it. So, you have to do the same.”

“What I did caused much more damage than that,” he countered.

“And you’ve been at it *much freaking longer*, may I point out?” I said, stabbing a finger into his chest. “That evens it up. Got it?”

Kiel looked at me, his eyes as piercing as the cool blue waters of the river. For a long time, he didn’t say anything. I assumed he was building himself up to defy me anyway,

despite my argument. So, I balled up a fist and prepared myself to club him over the head until he saw reason.

I would probably need both fists.

His hand came up, fingers first holding, then caressing my jaw and cheek, gently stroking the skin.

“You really are a remarkable woman, Jada,” he said with unexpected tenderness to match his touch.

It was a good thing I was already sitting on him because between how he was looking at me and the touch of his fingers on my face, my knees were feeling more than a little wobbly. Kiel didn’t often turn on his charm, but when he did, I fell for it faster than I’d gone down the mountainside.

“Thank you,” I managed to eke out. “But you still aren’t going in there alone, mister. Got it?”

My finger bounced off his rock-hard chest.

“No,” he said quietly, a smile tugging his lips upward. “I suppose I’m not alone anymore, am I?”

I smiled widely at his tacit acknowledgment. It was no longer he or I, but *we*.

“Together,” I said, the word containing several meanings.

His face finally gave in and, despite the looming darkness just a few miles off, a broad smile split his face.

“Together,” he agreed, standing up.

I slipped off him but stayed at his side as water streamed off our naked bodies and we looked at the City of Hammers in the distance.

“Together, we go in, and we hit the forge. Forget Lycaonus. Just destroy the forge.”

“Move fast. Strike hard,” I agreed, taking deep breath, a familiar surge of defiance boiling up from somewhere deep within.

Kiel snarled, fur sprouting across his body. “Let’s do this.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

The horse-drawn cart clattered along the road, and my heart beat in time with each bump of the wheels.

“Easy,” Kiel rumbled from where he sat beside me on the single plank that served as seats for the ore-hauler. His hand landed on my upper thigh, sending a shock through me so strong I nearly jumped in the air. “Whoa.”

I exhaled slowly through soot-stained lips, resisting the urge to swipe at the grimy covering we’d rubbed into our skin to better blend in as we approached the black steel gates of Nycitum.

“Sorry,” I said at last, trying to gather the frazzled pieces of my nerves. “I’m not sure why I’m so on edge.”

“Better to get it out now,” Kiel said, his head and back bowed forward still, playing the part of the downtrodden, depressed miner to the fullest.

I did my best to copy the posture, but it was hard. We were so close to achieving a major win. And my inner demons screamed at me that it would go horribly, horribly wrong.

Kiel squeezed my leg again in an attempt to reassure me.

“It’ll work,” he said. “Trust me, it’ll work. Let me do the talking, okay? Just stay silent and sullen.”

“Can do,” I said. Hopefully, I could keep it together until we were inside the city. “Though, can I just repeat, that when you said we should infiltrate the city, I assumed that meant you had a secret entrance like in Lycaon. This was *not* what I had in mind.”

“I’m aware,” he said with a chuckle. “Which is exactly why I didn’t tell you ahead of time.”

“Jerk,” I said lovingly, a smile pushing through my fear for a moment.

“I know.”

He squeezed me again, then removed his hand as we neared the gate. It wouldn't do for the guards to see us as anything more than a pair of miners down on their luck, trying to offload their cart of ore to one of the city's smelters.

"State your business," the guard closest to Kiel barked.

Kiel brought the cart to a halt, lifting his head only a hair. "Ore to sell, sir," he said glumly.

"Stay there," the guard ordered, motioning for another pair of guards, each clad in the brilliant steel of the Wulfhere, to inspect the cart.

We sat there, trying to act bored, while the detachment of soldiers examined every aspect of the cart and its ore to ensure we weren't carrying anything nefarious or smuggling anyone in.

After an intense five-minute search that had me on edge the entire time, the captain waved us through the gates. We made our way through the city, dropping the cart off at a smeltery that looked almost as downtrodden as we did. The owner thanked us profusely for choosing his services and promised it would only be a few hours before we would have our smelted metal. Minus his payment, of course.

Having left the cart behind, we moved deeper into the city, where we found a sympathetic contact of Kiel's, who helped us clean ourselves and change out of our ragged miners' garb. We said our thanks, then continued our journey up the tiers of Nycitum. All the while, the flag of Lycaonus fluttered in the breeze high above us, hanging off the side of the tallest tower, leaving it clear of the smelters and the streams of ash and smoke they spewed into the air.

"That's a looooot of guards," I murmured as we walked past the towering gates that kept the public from ascending to the highest tier, where the Grand Forge, the Alpha's palace, and extra guard barracks were located.

"Agreed," Kiel grunted under his breath, keeping his head down, neither of us stopping or even slowing. The less we did to bring attention to ourselves, the better. Instead, we walked

with the crowds on the streets, taking in all we could as we went.

“We could probably take them by surprise,” I said. “But we wouldn’t get much farther than that. The time factor alone would mean the gates would be closed before we could get through them.”

Kiel just bobbed his head in agreement. Once we were out of sight of the guards, we shuffled off the street and leaned against an alley opening.

“We need a new plan,” I said, stating the obvious.

There was no way we could sneak through the gates. That had always been the trickiest part of the operation, but neither of us had counted on the guards being *that* plentiful. Not to mention on high alert, watching everyone carefully for the slightest indication they would try to get past.

“I know. I’m thinking.”

I watched a plume of smoke lift into the air as one forge or smelter or another started up again after a brief pause.

“Kiel,” I said, still staring at the exhaust smoke.

“I’m thinking.”

“*Kiel*,” I repeated a bit more stridently.

When I saw his head move in my peripherals, I pointed up at the sky.

“What? The smoke?” he asked, confused.

“Yeah,” I said, twisting to stare higher up the mountain, where thicker amounts of soot billowed into the air from the huge chimneys of the highest forges.

“What about it?”

I shrugged. “What if we go down instead of up? The Grand Forge smokestacks empty into the mountains. Would it be possible to climb down them?”

Kiel’s immediate objections died on his lips as he considered the idea.

“It’s insane,” he said. “If they fire up that particular furnace while we’re descending ...”

I frowned. “Weren’t you the one who said that insane isn’t the same as impossible?”

He clenched his jaw at having his own words used against him. “Yes, I was,” he admitted. “But that’s when I knew the plan would work. This ...”

“We’re short on time. Leaving the city and hiking up the mountain out of sight, then getting into one of the chimney shafts will take a lot of time. We can either continue arguing,” I said. “Or we can go for it. Because we aren’t getting through the guards. Besides, this gives us our exit as well. Just go back up the way we came.”

That won him over. I could see it in his eyes, the way the blue flickered between icy objection and frosty determination before settling eventually on the latter.

“Let’s go,” he said, pushing off the stone wall and leading us back down through the city.

We gathered the ore cart we’d intended to abandon, took our payment after selling the smelted metals, and left through the front gate. The guards paid us little attention. They weren’t concerned with anyone leaving. Only newcomers.

The instant we could abandon the stolen cart where it wouldn’t be discovered for several days, we did, pausing just long enough to free the horse. Then we shifted and ran, pushing ourselves hard to circle the mountain until the city was out of sight. That was when we began our ascent, moving carefully. Though there were few patrols in the upper reaches of the mountain, there was also less space to hide.

We stumbled upon a cold chimney exit by sheer happenstance. Without smoke billowing from them, they were all but impossible to find. It was our first bit of true fortune in quite some time.

“Got it,” Kiel announced as he worked the corner free to lift the cover enough for us to enter. “It’ll be heavy, but we should

be able to lift it on our way out. I don't want to leave it up in case patrols are tasked with checking them."

"Sounds good," I said, scrambling through the opening.

I wasn't expecting us to care. The odds of surviving our little act of sabotage were slim. If we did get that far on the way back, we could worry about the grate then.

With my shoulders against one side of the chimney and my feet braced on the other, I started to shimmy downward, step by careful step. The soot on the walls was slippery, and one wrong move would send me plummeting down to my death. In minutes, I was covered in sweat from the exertion, muscles aching.

Climbing back up would be a nightmare.

Neither of us spoke as we descended. The sounds of our feet and shoulders on the rocky walls were loud enough. We didn't want our voices to tip off anyone below.

Just stay dark, I prayed, hoping the blacksmiths below wouldn't need that particular chimney.

What felt like hours passed as we made our way down. My entire body was trembling with every shuffle of my feet and slide of my shoulders. Although we weren't incinerated, the temperature was increasing with every foot. I could only imagine what it would be like in the forge itself.

Then, unexpectedly, my foot hit ground. Adjusting my brace, I tapped around with the foot to make sure it wasn't just a protrusion. Then I reached down with a hand.

Bottom.

Carefully, I eased myself out of the furnace, slowly peeking around as sweat poured from my face as I was fully immersed in the roiling center of the works that formed the Grand Forge.

Although I could hear the sound of metal smashing against metal in the distance, a sort of oddly deep *clunk* that sounded with rhythmic consistency, there were no sounds of life from nearby.

The forge's interior was lit mostly by fires flickering in metal containers, waiting to be used. Wall torches could be found here and there, but the entire place was full of shadows and darkness.

"Now, what?" I whispered into Kiel's ear as we crouched in the semi-darkness.

"Now, we start destroying it," he said, grabbing a discarded heavy forge hammer from where it lay against a nearby wall. "Just smash and break. Leave nothing intact for them to use."

"I want one of those," I said, pointing at his weapon of choice.

He smiled, looked around, then pointed at another one lying against the giant rectangular box of another smelting furnace. I started creeping toward it, peering around the corner of the furnace we'd descended through—

Only to freeze as I found myself staring directly at a familiar but extremely unexpected figure.

What the fuck was Lycaonus doing down there? That wasn't part of our plan!

My first panicked thought was that somehow the alpha was waiting for us, that he knew we were there, and the trap was about to be sprung. It was over.

Until he started speaking to someone I couldn't see.

Easing back around the corner as slowly as I could, I took a breath, my body trembling with adrenaline. Kiel reached my side, looking around the corner to see what had set me off.

"What's he doing here?" I said, my lips right against Kiel's ear, though I doubted Lycaonus could hear us over the smashing of the Great Forge's internal hammers and the occasional roar of an exposed fire.

"I don't know," Kiel replied. "But we need to find out who he's talking to. Come on."

He started easing himself around the other side of our furnace. After a moment, I managed to force myself to go after him.

Whatever was going on, it couldn't be good. I just hoped we weren't too late.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The forge came alive around us as we moved.

Floor vents billowed steam without warning, sending the temperature skyrocketing. Smoke filled the air, and a mighty roar shook the entire building, the vibration freeing soot and other debris that drifted downward from the ceilings. A wave of heat pushed out and over us.

“What the hell was that?” I asked nervously as we froze at the abrupt change.

“If I had to guess, I would say that the Master Blacksmith just stoked the Grand Forge to life.”

“I thought all of this was the Grand Forge?” I said, gesturing around.

“Feeders,” he said. “There’s one forge, one furnace, at the heart of it all. The one that created the stones, and the one that Lycaonus will use for the swords as well. That is the one we must destroy.”

“I don’t like the fact that it just came to life now,” I said. “Not when we’re so close.”

Steam continued to billow from the floor vents, and a low groan filled the air as something stirred in the depths of the facility. Great hammer blows shook the foundation, each far larger than anything a person could wield.

“Come,” Kiel said, starting forward again.

We crept our way from smaller forge to smaller forge, hiding behind them along with various tables and giant cast iron buckets designed to hold molten hot liquid. Eventually, we reached the end. There, as we peered around the corner, we saw Lycaonus.

The Alpha stood on a flat walkway of carved stone. On either side of him, a steady flow of liquid metal flowed past, heading toward the giant blast furnace at the far end of the

walkway. Waterfalls of fiery liquid poured down from high above into waiting pools on either side of the forge.

There, a figure in all black armor waited, immobile, with giant hammer in one hand. No, I realized with a start. His hand had been *replaced* by a hammer. It was literally welded to his forearm.

Behind the mystery figure, the flames that roared in the Grand Forge moved in a rhythm different from any fire I'd ever seen. There was something almost ... intelligent about it. The forge had a life of its own. Something not natural. Though, just *what*, I couldn't decide.

Nor did I have time to. Because Lycaonus wasn't alone, and he was speaking.

"Relax, Helix," he was saying, speaking to someone who could only be another of the Alphas.

I wasn't familiar with the second man. He was tall, with a strong, pointed nose and long white hair held back with a single clasp. There was an undeniable weathered look to his skin, which, even in the darkness, was obviously several shades darker than Lycaonus. That would make sense for a man who had to have spent many decades or more at sea, given the maritime nature of his home.

But there was no mistaking the glowing green egg-shaped stone the man held tucked protectively under one arm.

"Relax? How am I supposed to do that? Tell me, Lycaonus, what are you going to do about this madness? Two Alphas are dead now, with Nycitus having been slain in his sleep. These rebels are getting bold. We must respond!" Though he was unsettled, and obviously angry, Helix maintained strict control of his body. He didn't pace or even so much as frown as he rebutted Lycaonus' point.

A shadow stirred behind them, which was when I realized the pair wasn't alone. Lycaonus' pet Nehringi waited nearby. And farther to the right, hidden by the flow of steam, half a dozen guards stood around idly, trying very hard not to look like they were straining to hear what the Alphas were saying.

Judging by how they stood in separate groups, I guessed one trio of guards were Helix's and the other was Lycaonus' men.

"Calm," Lycaonus preached. "I have the situation under control. Soon, the rebels won't be an issue. That's why I had everyone meet me here. To ensure we can get ahead of this issue before they get to anyone else. I'll take care of it. Trust me."

I exchanged looks with Kiel. Lycaonus had to be talking about the swords. There was no other conclusion to be drawn than that. Which was why Helix had brought his along. We were too late.

"Perhaps you'd care to explain to me how you intend to 'take care of it.' Nycitus was supposed to do that already. That's why we sent him out with a huge army, and look what happened to him. So far, everyone who goes against them is having their ass handed back on a silver platter. Weren't you just buried under a mountain, after all?"

Helix wasn't fearmongering. He was stating facts with rough bluntness.

"And yet, here I am," Lycaonus said with a broad grin that was far too confident for my liking.

"I should be back in Helisson," the alpha said. "Keeping the peace. People are becoming unsettled. They're starting to question things in a way we haven't seen since the earliest days. This is a big threat. Bigger, I think, than you realize, Lycaonus. Our position is more unstable than it has been in centuries. It must change."

"And it will," Lycaonus said, gesturing for the other Alpha to follow him as he headed down the walkway toward the forge and the figure in black. "Let me show you how."

In the darkness, Lycaonus' Nehringi kept pace with them, moving with that ethereal hunting grace that scared even my wolf.

It was a shame the assassin hadn't died when Kiel tossed him off the side of a cliff. That would have been convenient.

"I don't like this," Kiel murmured into my ear.

“Me, neither. But we knew this was his plan.”

Kiel shook his head. “Something doesn’t feel right.”

The Alphas paused near the Grand Forge. The figure all in black still hadn’t moved, waiting immobile, like some kind of statue.

“Okay,” Helix said, looking around. “What is it? What is this grand plan of yours that you couldn’t tell me thirty feet over there?”

Lycaonus nodded. “When I was in the mountain, buried under it, as you said, I saw the way forward. And it wasn’t with the stones.”

“Without the stones?” Helix asked, the statement finally breaking the man’s composure. “You want to make us all mortal again? That seems ... counterproductive.”

“Not when you see what I’ve seen,” Lycaonus said. “The stones are not the answer. What I saw, for the briefest moment, is something so obvious we should have seen it from the start. For mere moments, Fate was bound to something else. A weapon.”

Helix cocked his head, a streak of eagerness twisting his face. “A sword? That’s what you’ve ordered forged down here? A sword to bind Fate within, isn’t it? Yes, I can understand. If we wield those swords, then we would be able to do much, much more.”

“You always were the swiftest on the uptake,” Lycaonus said, patting the other Alpha on the shoulder.

“How do we do it?” Helix asked, looking at the forge as it heated, the flames within seemingly coiled, eager to strike at anything fed to them.

“That sword,” Lycaonus said dreamily, “had one shard in it. One piece of Fate. The weapon I’m creating will have *all* of them.”

At that moment, the sword of Lycaonus’ pet Nehringi burst through Helix’s chest from behind, impaling the Alpha, raising

him clear off the floor, the weight of his body slowly widening the cut as gravity pulled on him.

Lycaonus then snatched the stone from Helix's hands and tossed it into the forge. The fires greedily swallowed it, catching the metal and glowing green, melting away the cage that held Fate.

The Master Blacksmith finally moved, swinging into motion as he began to fold and hammer away at the metal, adding it to something already at work in the depths of the Grand Forge.

There was a cry and then a clatter from farther back down the walkway. My head whipped around to see Helix's guards dead on the ground as the other trio of armored Wulphere wiped their swords clean.

"Clean this up," Lycaonus said, gesturing at Helix. The Alpha was gasping his last breaths as he slid free of the Nehringi's sword, his immortality stripped away by the destruction of the Fate Stone. "Then bring me Pallantia. The sooner I get this wrapped up, the better."

He walked past the prone guards and out of the room, leaving his Nehringi and soldiers to do the dirty work of disposing of the corpses. Which they did by dumping them into the furnaces as additional fuel.

I exchanged a look with Kiel. It was worse than we'd ever expected. Lycaonus wasn't creating swords for all the Alphas.

He was forging a single one for himself. And if he succeeded ... nothing in the world could stop him.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“We can’t let him get away with this,” Kiel said, clutching the commandeered hammer tightly as we crouched in the darkness.

“How do we stop him? He’s already begun the process of merging the remaining shards into one stone.”

“I don’t know, but we have to make sure he doesn’t get them all. Which means breaking the forge, so it’s unusable.”

I looked at the giant room filled with industrial equipment. Bellows and blast furnaces, pipes, pumps, brick ovens, and pooling areas. In the distance, hammers, bigger than a man and made of solid steel, lifted and fell, worked by unknown machinery in the depths.

“That’s a lot of stuff to wreck,” I said dubiously. “We’ll be spotted and attacked long before then. The Nehringi and guards won’t be far.”

“Then we’d better make it count.” Kiel shrugged. “I don’t know a better way. Do you?”

“Not really.” I frowned. “We should steal it.”

“What?”

“The shard he’s already working on. Steal it before he can finish it. Then, maybe we can find a way to break it. Free however many shards he’s already worked into it.”

Kiel grinned. “Now, there’s an idea. Okay, I’ll create a diversion. You go for the blade or whatever it is at the moment. Just watch out for the Master Blacksmith. I’m sure he’s been ordered to defend it at all costs.”

“I will,” I said.

He started to stand.

“Wait,” I said, pushing him back against the warm bricks of the furnace we were hiding behind, pressing my body to his, my lips sealing his shut as I stole a moment.

“What was that for?” he asked breathlessly when I released him.

“A reminder of why you have to make it out of here,” I said as his eyes traversed my body, lingering on my breasts. He’d seen them a thousand times, but that didn’t seem to matter. His mouth always twitched with a smile each time he knew I caught him staring.

Men.

“Now, go!” I urged, brushing his face gently with one hand.

“Be safe. Be smart,” he growled, smashing his mouth against mine quickly, hotly, and then he was gone, the touch of his lips a ghostly caress that faded as he rose with a roar and began to smash stuff.

It was amazing. We were in the heart of enemy territory on a mission to save the world from the tyranny of one of the vilest men I’d ever met. Trained guards and assassins were all around us, each one longing to plunge a blade through our hearts.

Yet, despite *all* that danger and the utmost seriousness of our mission, Kiel was easily having the time of his life. What *was it* with men and their enjoyment of breaking things? He grinned lustily as his hammer swung to and fro, bashing pipes, shattering bricks, blowing open holes in containers that spilled hot coals. He shoved merrily on one giant bucket with the end of his hammer and molten iron spilled out across the floor.

Giant clouds of steam filled the air as he broke pipe after pipe, the machines in the background screeching in protest as they slowed, the loss of pressure shutting everything down.

“Boom!” Kiel roared happily as he swung the mighty hammer in a full arc, the entire side of a minor forge coming apart in a spray of brick fragments.

“Goodbye!” He brought the hammer overhead onto a worktable, smashing it in half with one blow, sending everything on it flying.

“See you later!” Spinning on one foot, he blasted a huge bin across the room to break open on the wall.

“Going deep!” The hammer came up underhand to crash into a portable cart, sending it hurtling through the air.

Pay attention, Kiel. Don't get yourself killed just because you're having fun breaking things!

The alarm was ringing now, and guards were running toward Kiel, who was singing a deep ballad about a cow and a barmaid, although he had substituted Lycaonus' name in for the maid.

“Next time, *I* get to go smashy-smashy,” I muttered under my breath as I crept through the chaos, heading for the one thing Kiel hadn't yet broken.

The heart of the Grand Forge and the Master Blacksmith himself. The man, if he truly was alive, stood still at the opening of the heated furnace as he'd before. Unmoving, unnaturally so.

Sneaking up behind him, I picked up a nearby hammer and swung it at his right knee, aiming to cripple him before I even went for the blade.

The hammer nearly whistled through the air with the effort I put into my swing. There should have been no way he escaped unscathed.

CLANG.

At the last second, the blacksmith's arm came down, blocking my blow with the shaft of his hammer.

Astonished at his speed, I wasn't ready when he twisted his hammer, locked it around mine, and pulled with incredible strength. My makeshift weapon was pulled from my grip and launched across the room, disappearing into a cloud of steam.

Instead of waiting around, I struck out, kicking hard for the *other* knee. The blacksmith was fast, but he wasn't prepared for that, and something shattered as I connected. I lashed out with *both* feet a second time, and the figure tumbled away in the same direction as my lost hammer.

Immediately, I was on my feet, looking into the forge, trying to figure out how I was supposed to steal the piece of sword.

A length of steel glimmering with swirling green hues stared back at me, heated and practically glowing, but with *emerald* fire, not red-orange flame.

There was no way I could pick it up. Frantically, I searched for something to grab it with. My eyes eventually landed on a pair of tongs. Inexpertly, I grabbed the handle and plunged them in, trying to drag the metal out.

A bar of pure steel descended around my neck and pulled tight, cutting off blood and oxygen flow. Gripped on either side by hands covered in black metal gauntlets, I was lifted free of the floor, my feet kicking and flailing wildly even as my grip on the tongs intensified and the length of green metal was pulled from the forge.

The Master Blacksmith took a step forward, changing his plans. His movement shoved the glowing length of metal deeper into the furnace—and I started to follow.

With a shout of fear, I struggled to free myself as the forge flared to life, releasing fresh heat that roiled out of the opening and across my skin. No matter how hard I fought, the blacksmith inched me inexorably closer to the heat and my doom.

Then, just like that, the pressure from around my throat was gone. I fell to the floor, landing hard on my side as Kiel tackled the blacksmith, the pair of them rolling away.

“Get the blade!” Kiel hollered, picking up the blacksmith and tossing the metal form at a pair of advancing guards. One of them fell under the weight of the black-armored form, while the other spun away under a glancing blow, only to fall into one of the rivers of liquid metal that flowed on either side of the walkway.

The dying screams of the soldier bounced off the walls, filling the room with his death cry. Thankfully, it was cut off abruptly as orange-red molten iron filled his mouth.

Getting to my feet I reached for the blade again—

Only to leap back as the Nehringi darted in, his sword nearly taking my head off. I lifted the tongs automatically into

a guard position, saving my life as they stopped the blow inches from my neck.

Working in tandem, the Nehringi and the recovered blacksmith drove Kiel and me away from the Grand Forge, deeper into the ruins of the facility.

However, once we were far enough away, the blacksmith abruptly spun and marched back to his position next to the forge, where he stood unmoving. The Nehringi didn't seem surprised, flowing smoothly into an attack, alternating between both of us. Tongs and hammer deflected his strikes, but it was an uneven fight.

My foot caught on something, and I fell backward with a cry.

The Nehringi came for me, but Kiel moved first. His hammer blasted a pipe, driving a cloud of fresh steam into the assassin's face. The Nehringi jerked away, one arm coming up to protect his face even as the superheated water ate away at his protective leather gauntlet, melding it to the skin underneath.

"We're not getting the blade," I said as Kiel hauled me to my feet.

"I know," he said. Then he hauled back and flung the hammer through the air.

It hit the Grand Forge head on, and the brick walls came apart, spilling coals as the entire face of it came apart under the impact. The hammer continued on through, blowing an even larger hole out the back.

"But now it'll take them some time to fix it," he growled. "Come on, we have to go."

The Nehringi was already recovering but was forced to retreat momentarily under a barrage of makeshift missiles, several of which connected hard.

Kiel and I turned and bolted into the maze of machinery, much of it now broken and useless. Finding the unlit furnace we'd come from, Kiel dove in and began climbing as fast as he could. I was a moment behind him, shoving my back to the

wall, my feet pressed against the far side while my hands stabilized me.

We shimmied up the soot-covered walls with all the speed we dared. It wasn't as fast as I would have liked, but we had to balance speed with ensuring we didn't slip.

Less than a quarter of the way up, by my best estimation, was where things *really* began to go wrong.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

“I’ve got good news, and I’ve got bad news,” I called up to Kiel, who was fifteen or twenty feet above me.

“Given our current situation, I fail to see how there could be *any* good news,” he said. “Therefore, I petition to rename them to bad news and *really* bad news.”

“Okay. I have bad news, and I have super-extra bad news,” I said, still easing my way up one step at a time.

“Sounds about right, given how everything has gone,” he muttered. “All right. What’s the regular old bad news?”

“The Nehringi isn’t going to come up after us,” I said cheerfully. “So, that’s nice.”

Kiel grunted. “Why do I feel like that’s not actually good news?”

“Probably because *nobody* is coming up after us. For safety reasons.”

A light dusting of soot dropped onto my face courtesy of his movement. I shook my head and blew it away as best I could, but several flakes still rested on my cheeks, the itch of their presence threatening to drive me mad.

“What’s wrong with climbing a furnace shaft like this without any sort of harness and rope?” Kiel said. “Seems fine to me.”

“That’s not quite what I meant,” I said.

“I figured not. Go on. Give it to me.”

“This one would be because of a lack of protection against fire from the furnace. Which they’re quickly bringing to life below us.”

“Crap.”

“Yeah.”

There wasn’t much else to say or do. We were either going to make it to the top, or the heat building below us would cook

us to a crisp. There was no middle ground, not anymore.

By the time we reached what I estimated to be the halfway point, the furnace below was beginning to glow a merry reddish-orange, and heat was building uncomfortably against my ass.

It certainly acted like a shot of adrenaline, pushing us on faster. I'd closed the gap to Kiel to within ten feet, even with his faster movements. My burning muscles were relegated to a background concern. If we didn't reach the top soon, a lot more of me would be burning.

The walls were heating up as the Nehringi and others stoked the furnace, probably adding endless fuel to it, far beyond what was necessary.

"Next time," I said through the smoke starting to drift upward as well, "we destroy the forge we're using as an escape vector as well, okay?"

"Deal," Kiel said. "The next time we sneak into Nycitum to stop a maniacal and deranged immortal Alpha from binding seven shards of a goddess into a single sword in an attempt to conquer the world, we'll make sure we don't get cooked alive on the way out."

"Good. I'm glad it's settled," I said with an unexpected laugh. Even in the face of near certain death, Kiel somehow managed to make me smile. A good talent, considering how often we found ourselves facing such steep odds.

About three-quarters of the way up, the going got tricky. The walls were uncomfortable to touch, my skin warning me that I would have some wonderful burns from constant contact to the heated stone. We were both coughing from smoke inhalation, and our bodies poured sweat. To make it worse for me, Kiel's sweat dripped onto me.

"Go faster," I urged as a fresh surge of heat cooked my underside a bit more. "Must go faster."

"We're getting there," Kiel said before hacking up fresh soot.

“So is my ass. Much more ‘getting there’ and it’ll go from rare to well done.”

Climbing and climbing, we went up the shaft. My knees and legs were screaming, my shoulders and palms blistering as they touched fresh hot stone. I shoved the pain to the side, bottling it up and forcing it into the depths of my mind, refusing to let it take over. All that was necessary to send me hurtling straight down to a fiery death was one wrong movement designed to lessen the pain.

I had to embrace the pain. Each new throb meant I was properly wedged into the shaft. Each stab of agony a reminder that I could still get out, that I had that chance.

Onward, we went, my skin covered in sweat, my muscles and joints wobbly and ready to give out. Smoke flowed past us nonstop as oxygen was flooded into the forge. Each cough threatened to be the one that would pull my shoulders away from the walls just that extra bit.

And then, just like that, the top was in reach. Cold mountain air stilled the encroaching heat, driving it back. Kiel grunted, lifting the grate free and climbing out to safety.

In another ten feet, I would join him. I moved slowly, forcing myself to do everything with agonizing precision. I had reached the most likely point of failure, I knew. With the end so close, impatience set in. I had to fight against it. To shove it down and not listen to the internal urge to get it done.

“Almost there,” Kiel said, leaning in and extending a hand. “You’ve got this. Slow and steady.”

I inched upward. My hand went over my head to grab his.

At that moment, the entire world *groaned*, a physical thing that transcended rock and skin, felt by everything animate and inanimate alike.

I slipped as the weight of it hit me and pressed down, my knees buckling as I fell.

“Gotcha!” Kiel cried as his fingers clamped around my sweaty wrist with vise-like strength.

But I barely saw or noticed it. My mind was being taken elsewhere. To a cave far away in a room where a ghostly green figure floated.

“*Jada.*” The voice was pained, shot through with agony.

“Fate,” I whispered, surprised she could still reach out to me since I was no longer home to a shard of her being. “We failed, didn’t we?”

“*He grows stronger,*” she whispered, the ethereal glow cracking with white light that sucked some of the energy out. “*You must stop him.*”

“We tried,” I said. “But we were too late. He’s already forging the sword. Binding the rest of you to it. We couldn’t stop him ...”

The figure fell to one knee, needing a hand to hold herself up. I reached forward to help, but my hands went through her.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “We ... we failed.”

Fate looked up at me, her eyes echoing my despair. “Not over ...” she said weakly, the green light fading, “until it’s over.”

Then she was gone, and I was back in the exhaust shaft, dangling precariously from Kiel’s grip.

“*JADA!*” he was roaring. “Wake up! Pull it together! I can’t hold you here forever!”

I shook my head, then reached out with my legs to steady myself. With his help, I climbed out of the shaft, rolling over onto the cold stone of the mountain peak, gasping for breath. Cool air entered my lungs, and almost immediately, I was overcome with a coughing fit as I hacked up black sludge and spit it out with a grimace.

“I’m so sexy right now,” I muttered as Kiel did the same nearby in the darkness, night having fallen.

“You’re bent over, face near the ground, with your ass in the air,” he remarked. “Still counts.”

“My ass is burned. I can feel the blisters.”

“Yeah, but it’s still *you*,” he growled. “That’s what matters to me.”

Somehow, despite the net of failure draping over me, I managed a weak smile. We were all going to die, but Kiel had finally figured out how to express his emotions.

At that point, I would take any win I could get.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s go.”

“Where?” I asked. “What’s the point? We lost. Didn’t you feel that? That was Lycaonus killing Pallantia. He must have been the last of the other Alphas. We weren’t even able to slow him down!”

“Maybe,” Kiel agreed. “Now, get up.”

Glaring unhappily at him, I did as he said.

“Good. Now, let’s get going. It’s a long journey back to Arcadia or wherever else the others may have gone by now.”

“Arcadia? Why?”

“Because,” he said sternly, “this isn’t over yet.”

“How do you know?”

A look I’d never seen before came upon his face. An icy determination backed by utter belief in his purpose.

“Because we’re not dead yet,” he snarled. “And Lycaonus will regret that fact.”

Chapter Thirty

We had just crossed into western Teagan when the scent tickled my nose. Skidding to a halt, I lifted my snout into the air, drawing deeply to confirm what I thought I smelled. I did.

Ahead, Kiel had slowed and was looking at me, his wolf as still as a statue, utterly trusting that I knew what I was doing.

I sampled the air several more times, orienting in the direction of the scent trail, then began to trot after it. Kiel followed soundlessly as we picked our way through the underbrush, our senses on full alert. Whether he knew why I'd changed course or not, he recognized something wasn't right.

Something was very not right. There was absolutely no reason Clive should be out that way. We'd left him and Andi back in Arcadia in charge of the city while we headed north. So, why would *he* have come north? It could be a trap, of course, and in fact, it was highly likely that it was, which is why we were taking such care in following.

After all, why would he be all the way up there?

The scent grew stronger, meaning we were outpacing Clive. I slowed, not wanting to come upon him except on *my* terms, until I could be sure it wasn't a trap.

Another mile through the forest, and I paused as a *second* scent merged with Clive's and kept going. Andi. She was there, too. Why would *both* of them have come north? The acrid scent of smoke was mixing in heavily with theirs as well. Had they stopped to light a fire? That was dangerous and much more careless than I'd expect from the two of them. The odds of it being a trap were growing by the minute.

I glanced at Kiel. He nodded, pawing silently at the air before throwing his muzzle in the direction of the scent of our friends. He knew what we were after now, and the slight pulling back of his lips in a snarl showed he also understood it was probably a trap.

But he wanted to continue.

So, we did. Another mile. The scent grew stronger. I slowed. But it didn't weaken. We were *close*. Carefully, we crept through the forest, approaching a dip in the land. Looking around, trying to spot any signs of a trap, I picked my way to the edge of the hill.

At the bottom, hunched over, hands on his head, head on his knees, was Clive. Next to him was Andi. She was staring straight ahead into nothingness, unmoving. I watched for a solid minute before witnessing any motion. They weren't dead, then. So, what was wrong?

I looked at Kiel, who'd joined me. He gave the wolf equivalent of a shrug. Whatever was going on, he didn't have a clue, either.

Stifling the urge to throw caution to the wind and head down the slope to see what was wrong with my friend, I circled the small ravine to search for anyone else who might be waiting downwind to try to grab us. It took twenty minutes, but I picked up nothing.

Then, and only then, did I shift back and head down the slope, making enough noise that both of them heard me coming. Only Clive looked up. Andi just continued to stare ahead into empty space, seeing something only she could see.

"Clive," I said, dropping to my knees at his side. "Clive, what is it? What happened? Are you okay?"

His response was a groan, low and filled with unspeakable agony. For a moment, I thought he would fall over dead. Was there a wound somewhere I hadn't notice? A cursory inspection showed nothing.

"Come on," I said, shaking him a little. "Snap out of it. Tell me, what happened?"

"I'm sorry."

I frowned, then whipped my head around, expecting the trap to finally spring itself. But nothing happened.

"Sorry for *what*?" I pushed. "Clive, you're scaring me. What's going on?"

“Arcadia,” Andi said in a ghostly whisper, the voice of someone unattached to the there and then. She was lost in a memory.

“What *about* Arcadia?” I pushed, my heart beating a little faster. What the hell had happened while we were gone?

“Gone.”

I stiffened at the single blunt word from Clive.

“What do you mean *gone*?” Kiel barked, his tone hard and commanding, stirring something in the desolate shifters. “Explain. Now.”

“We were getting ready to leave,” Clive said. “That was the plan, as you know. If the army didn’t disintegrate, we leave, let them have the city without a fight. Make it as easy on the populace as possible.”

I nodded, glancing up at Kiel. That was what we’d discussed. Being a port city on Lake Arcadia, it would be easy for our troops to sail out without being attacked, just as we’d done to strike at Nycitus and his stone with our team. The army hadn’t brought any ships to close the port. Mainly because an armed fleet didn’t exist on the lake. There had never been any need. It should have worked.

“So, what went wrong?” I pushed.

“Before we could open the gates to let them know the city was surrendering ...” Clive shook his head, falling back into morose shock.

“They fired it,” Andi said, a sliver of anger coloring her words, the first real emotion either of them had displayed. “A rain of arrows touched with fire. We tried to get as many people onto boats as we could. Lots escaped into the water, swimming through the shallows.”

“But many didn’t,” Clive finished. “It was night. By the time they awoke, the fires had spread. The very stone itself was melting.”

“The screams,” Andi whispered, clamping a hand over her ears as if to drown out the memories she would never truly be

able to forget.

I collapsed onto the ground, my legs unwilling to support me.

“We did this,” I said to Kiel, looking up at him as the true import of what they were saying hit me. Arcadia, the second most populous city in the empire, was *gone*. “Us. We caused this.”

“They did it,” Kiel snarled, but his heart wasn’t in it.

“Yes, but it was our actions that put all those innocents in harm’s way,” I said, staggering to my feet as I pictured the screaming, the heat of the flames, the dead and dying as the fire ate away at them. Suddenly, the burns I’d suffered as I’d escaped up the exit shaft were nothing. I recalled the guard who’d fallen into the streams of liquid metal in the Grand Forge. His screams had been terrible.

They would have been nothing next to the citizens of Arcadia. The cries of thousands as they burned alive. Children crying for their mothers. Lovers holding each other as the flames consumed them, sharing one last passionate embrace. Never truly knowing what they’d done to deserve such a fate.

I staggered to my feet and hurried from the clearing before bending over a rock and emptying my stomach of its contents. Again and again, I heaved. Until there was nothing left, though my body kept trying. It wouldn’t make it go away. Nothing ever would.

Eventually, I just lay there, doing nothing until I could be confident moving wouldn’t bring on another fit. Glancing over my shoulder at the others to ensure they were still there, my eyes landed on Kiel. He hadn’t moved. Staring straight ahead, fists clenching and unclenching, his face could be made of granite for all it moved.

“What is it?” I asked, moving to his side. He was furious, that much was obvious, but there was something *else* in his expression. Something I couldn’t decipher.

“I hate myself for this more than you could ever imagine,” he said. “But, Jada ... this is it.”

“What do you mean?” He wasn’t making any sense.

“Word of this will spread like wildfire.” Kiel grimaced, unhappy with his choice of words. “And when it does, when the anger, the shock, everything we’re feeling, when it reaches the general populace? They won’t take it lying down. They will want to *do* something about it.”

I couldn’t disagree with his notion. But ...

“Does it really matter?” I asked, feeling a wave of despair crash over me as I finally spoke the words out loud. “Lycaonus has the sword now, Kiel. He can’t be stopped. Even if the entire population rose against him, it wouldn’t matter. You don’t understand how much *power* he wields now. For the brief amount of time I held a sword with one shard in it, I was invincible. Unstoppable. If that blade hadn’t shattered, who knows what I could have done. That was *one* shard, Kiel, he has *six* in a blade forged specifically to hold that kind of power. He could probably kill hundreds of us with a single thought!”

“Maybe,” Kiel said through gritted teeth. “Maybe not.”

I just stared at him, waiting for him to explain.

“Fate speaks to you.”

“When I had a piece of her inside me, yes,” I said.

“And in the exhaust shaft. She appeared to you again. You said so.”

“That was one time,” I countered. “And she didn’t look good. Either way, it’s not like I can just close my eyes and have a chat with her.”

“Well, you’re going to need to reach out to her,” Kiel said. “We’re going to need her help for this. She can’t hide in her temple. Not anymore, not unless she’s ready to admit defeat and stop trying.”

I’d never gotten that impression from Fate, but still ...

“I can try,” I said cautiously. “I don’t know if it’ll work. Why? Do you have a plan?”

“I do,” he said. “It’s not great. It won’t be easy. But I’m not sure we have a better option.”

“What is it?” I pushed.

“Clive. Andi. On your feet!” Kiel ordered sharply, his words slicing through the fog hanging over them. Before they knew what they were doing, they were on their feet. “You two have to get moving.”

“To do what?” Clive asked.

“Put the word out,” Kiel growled. “Every network. Every cell. Every town, village, and city. Spread it far and wide. Tell everyone what happened in Arcadia. It’s time we stopped hiding in the shadows.”

Andi cocked her head. “What do we say after that?”

“Tell them it’s time,” Kiel snarled, turning to look north. “We’re marching on Nycitum, and we’re going to bring this whole thing crashing down. One way or another.”

Chapter Thirty-One

“It’s not going to be enough, is it?”

Standing next to Kiel, I looked out across the field that had been taken over by our ad hoc army. The shifters began streaming into our meeting point within days of Clive and Andi heading out. At first, it was in small groups. Five here, ten there, maybe twenty. By the third day, they were arriving in the hundreds. Ordinary people from all walks of life who had simply, as Kiel said, “had enough.”

Many were members of the rebellion, informants and sympathizers who were done helping from the shadows. Others were active members of our resistance movement. But most were simply citizens who had heard about Arcadia and the other things the Alphas had done and were over it. They were ready to stand up to tyranny and evil because they saw the tipping point. They could see what was on the other side, and they didn’t want to be a part of it.

Hundreds had become thousands. The field teemed with people, spread out over the huge farm field. Crops had been trampled flat, but that really wasn’t our worry. A little less food wouldn’t matter at all if Lycaonus succeeded.

Yet, despite the best efforts, a week had passed, then ten days, and the stream had become a trickle. More arrived every day, but time was no longer on our side. The supplies people had come with were running low. We had to go before it was too late. So, the next morning, we were going to head out. It was a two-day march to Nycitum, past Lycaon, and into the mountainous terrain of the northern empire.

But despite all those who’d come, even including a rather large number of unhappy Wulphere who had joined the cause, we were going to be outnumbered by the Wulphere at Lycaonus’ command.

“No, probably not,” Kiel conceded, keeping his voice low so it wouldn’t carry. “But that no longer matters.”

“I know,” I said. “We have to try. Not doing so would be worse.”

He nodded. We were in agreement there. Even if we didn’t like it.

“What’s the plan, then?” I asked.

“The plan?” he waved at the assembled army. “The plan is the same as before. I’m going to go out there and give the best damn speech I can to these brave souls. Then we’re going to go out and do our best to win anyway. Because if we don’t, Lycaonus will bring war to the entire world. The free tribes east of the mountains will fall first, but he’ll march at the head of an army of Wulphere, and he won’t stop until everyone submits to him. The entire world will fall before that sword.”

I wanted to ask what made Kiel so sure *we* could stop him if others couldn’t. But I didn’t. It wasn’t the time to stir doubts.

“I’ll be with you,” I said, taking his hand and squeezing it. “From here until the end, wherever and whenever that may be.”

He gripped back. “Thank you. That means more than you know.”

We stood on the slight hilltop, watching all those below. Kiel had been right. The firing of Arcadia had turned the populace against Lycaonus. If there had been more time for the outrage to stir through the empire, I was sure we could have raised an army three or four times as big if not more. But that was the problem. Time was *short*, and many people wouldn’t hastily commit to our cause.

“Any word?” Kiel asked, breaking the comfortable silence that had fallen between us.

“From Clive?” I shook my head. “He should be on his way back from Pallas anytime now. He knows the plan, though. He’ll catch up with us on the march if he’s not in time.”

“No,” Kiel said. “From her. From Fate. Has she responded to you yet?”

I bit back a grimace.

“No,” I said bluntly. “Just like the last time and the time before that. Nothing.”

Kiel sighed.

“It’s not like that means much,” I pointed out, trying to maintain a positive attitude. “She rarely responds to me. Even when she was inside me.”

“We need her help, Jada. It all hinges on that. This”—he waved his hand—“this is inspiring and a great sight. But if you boil it down, it’s a *distraction*. They can’t defeat Lycaonus. Only we can do that. You and I with Fate.”

“I’m trying,” I said a bit too harshly. “She’s always told me that if I want her help or power or whatever to ‘make it so.’”

“Can’t you do that?”

I shook my head. “Not now. My need isn’t great enough. I’ve only ever done it in do-or-die situations. When everything is on the line. Those are the only times I’ve been able to use her power. And that was when I had it within me. Now? I don’t know. We’re still connected, somehow, but I haven’t heard anything from her. We may just have to wait until we’re in the thick of it.”

“That doesn’t sound very confident,” Kiel grunted.

“I know.” I shrugged. “But it’s all I’ve got.”

“We *need* her.”

“I know,” I snapped at him, tired of the constant pushing. “Trust me, I’m well aware of how much pressure is resting on my shoulders, Kiel, but it’s not like she’s a bartender at an inn. I can’t just summon up a goddess with a whistle or the snap of my fingers, okay? She’s been there when I needed her most, but never before.”

“How will we know she’ll be there this time?” he asked.

“I don’t know!” I snarled, walking away from him and the army, treading down the other side of the hill.

I closed my eyes, looking into my mind.

Fate. If you're there, I need to hear from you. I need to know we can count on your support. Please.

Ringling silence was my only answer. Angry at my inability to do the *one* thing our entire plan was asking me to do, I kicked at a rock, lashing out with my fury. The rock didn't move, proving to be attached to something deeper underground, and my foot smashed into the unmoving object.

"Ow!" I yelped, fighting the urge to fall to my knees in frustration.

Behind me, I heard Kiel begin speaking, his voice loud and clear, a clarion call to the army below.

Inhaling a deep breath, I crouched, pressing my palms to the ground, letting my anger flow into the ground as best as I could.

Relaxing my shoulders, I turned and started walking up the hill with big, long strides toward where Kiel spoke. Whatever happened, he and I would face it.

Together.

Chapter Thirty-Two

That night, the last we would spend before starting our march, we sat on opposite sides of our little campfire. Out there in the sprawling farmscapes of eastern Teagan, there was little worry about making fires. After all, if the thousands and thousands of shifters gathered hadn't attracted attention, what were a few hundred or thousand fires going to accomplish?

I stared into the flames. Every so often, my eyes flicked up to Kiel. I knew he was doing the same. He knew I was doing it. I knew that he knew ... and so on. Yet neither of us was ready to speak up. I had stood at his side while he spoke to the army. He gave them a loud, morale-boosting speech about standing up for the little guy, being willing to take a stand, and say "no more." He talked about the legends that would spread about this day and more. Not once had I interjected. I'd merely pumped my fist in support.

But in private, there was a wall between us. One neither was ready to break down. Not without knowledge that the other wanted it gone. And since we weren't really talking ... nobody was saying a thing. So, instead, we stared into the flames in utter silence.

"It's the last night before we leave."

Kiel's voice broke the silence so unexpectedly that I jerked in surprise, nearly losing my balance.

"Yes," I said awkwardly, the stiffness of our interaction making me sound wooden and emotionless. "It is."

"Most people would probably be, you know ..."

I looked up from the fire as he trailed off. His gaze had shifted from the fire to me, but now, he looked away. Biting back a grin, I just stared at him, enjoying the awkward squirm for what it was: an attempt.

"They would be *what?*" I pressed gently, wanting to hear him say it. He needed the practice. I wasn't trying to be mean about it.

“You know ...” He sighed. “*Together.*”

“Ah.” I nodded slowly. “We haven’t exactly said much to each other the past few hours. I’m not really feeling that sort of way.”

It was the truth. I wanted to jump into his arms—or onto his cock. There was no denying that I felt that certain pull. We didn’t know what tomorrow would bring, and the urgency made me want to be with him. But not until we talked.

Kiel made a face. He knew what I meant. Getting up, he came around to my side of the fire.

“May I sit down?” he asked politely.

“Yes, of course.” I smiled at his request, appreciative that he’d asked, regardless of how unnecessary.

He took the spot directly next to me, my left leg pressed into his right.

“I’m sorry about earlier,” he said. “About being pushy. I didn’t mean to put that on you.”

“I know,” I said. “I may have, ahem, slightly overreacted.”

A twitch ran through his body, but, showing more restraint than many men I knew, Kiel didn’t say a word about my admitted understatement.

Without asking, he draped an arm around me, and I snuggled into him. I loved how good he made me feel, how protective and safe that simple action was.

I frowned. Had I truly just thought that? Was love a word I was ready and willing to use around Kiel? Neither of us had broached that topic. Not since I’d tried and he’d forbidden it due to his true identity. Since then, we’d spent more time getting to know one another. There were no more secrets, and we’d undoubtedly grown closer, spending almost every waking moment together. But was it enough? Did I risk saying that word now.

What if I scared him off again? Going into battle with that hanging over us was not the way to go. Or worse, what if I

said *nothing*, and one of us didn't survive? If it were me, that regret would drive me into a very dark place.

"Thank you."

Kiel's words snatched me back to the present, the warmth of the campfire bathing the front of our bodies as we rested against one another, a perfect balance to keep each other from tipping over.

"For what?" I asked, unsure what I may have missed while I was busy being terrified about falling in love.

No, not falling in love. *Admitting* that I'd fallen in love. To him and to me. That was what still scared me. The truth, though ...

"Everything," he said, waving a hand vaguely at the fire. "You've believed in me from the start. There hasn't been any doubt in you."

"I wouldn't go that far," I said with a laugh. "You've thrown me for several loops."

He shook his head, denying my truth. "Maybe, but it never seemed that way. I honestly thought I'd never be comfortable telling anyone who I was. It's been centuries since I even tried. Then you came along, and all of a sudden, I hated myself for *not* telling you sooner. And when I did, you laughed it off."

"Maybe on the outside," I said. "I definitely had to think about that one a lot. But I saw who you were, and when I tried to convince myself that *that* person was some evil bogeyman from children's tales, I just couldn't do it. People change, and you've had seven centuries to do it. It's not that surprising, really."

"To you, it's not," he said with a wry laugh. "I, on the other hand, was terrified I was going to lose you, but I also knew I *had* to tell you, or I would never truly *have* you either."

"I'm glad you did," I told him, trying to put enough emphasis on my words to show how much it meant to me, that he'd been willing to trust me with the truth.

"Me, too," he said, leaning down to kiss the top of my head.

We sat in silence, taking in the presence of the other and our ... What were we? Our relationship? We hadn't actually talked about it. We were doing everything so differently than I'd been taught, not relying on the fate stones to tell us who our mates were.

"Kiel," I said, curiosity taking over.

"Yes?"

"How did ... how did mates find one another before the stones? How did you *know* you were with the one you were meant to be with?"

His muscles stiffened slightly at the question. "Fate would guide you," he said. "Gentle strings that you often didn't notice. Tugging you to decide to do or not do certain things. It would result in paths crossing. It was a very natural thing."

"But when you found them, did people—did they *know*? Or was it just an assumption?"

"I don't know."

I blinked. "What?"

He shrugged. "People *said* they knew, that it was obvious to them. But they only ever said that secondhand. I can't back that up one way or another."

Leaning slightly away so I could actually look at him, I shook my head. There was no way he was saying what I thought he was. "Are you saying you never ... you never had a mate?"

He smiled down at me, the look lopsided and easy, lacking the sadness I'd expected to find there. "I don't really think young me was the sort of person who deserved a mate, so you can let go of your sympathy. I wasn't interested in listening to Fate back then, either. I wanted to control her. Seems fitting that I, like the other Alphas, was always mateless."

"I guess," I said, staring deep into his eyes, wondering if he would say something about his *current* status. If there were ever a time ...

It couldn't be me. I'd pushed too hard, too fast already. Once bitten, twice shy. I needed Kiel to be the one to say it, to show me that *he* felt that deeply, and it wasn't just because I'd forced his hand. Perhaps it was petty of me. After all, it wasn't easy for him. But that was half of it, wasn't it? To do something not easy, to tell me how he *felt*. To give voice to his emotions. That was what I wanted to hear from him.

"I'm happy Fate brought you into my life," he said stiffly, obviously realizing he was expected to say something. "I want you to know, Jada, that I intend to be the type of person you deserve."

"You do?" It wasn't *quite* what I'd hoped to hear, but it was vastly better than silence, and I was learning to take what little steps I could with Kiel. Better that than to force it from him before he was ready.

"I swear it," he growled deeply enough I could feel his chest rumble against my side. "And when we defeat Lycaonus, I'm going to show you *just* what that means."

Chapter Thirty-Three

I was alone at the head of our army when a lone wolf appeared far ahead of us.

They stood unmoving, watching us. Turning my head, I growled at one of the nearby wolves to go fetch Kiel and for the rest of us to spread out and be alert. If an ambush was about to be sprung, I didn't want us to be caught in a column. That would make us targets.

We weren't a professional army by any standard, but any wolf knew how to scout the territory, and all along our flanks, individuals took that seriously, spreading out wide, off the road, into the fields, and the clumps of forest behind that, looking to warn the main body of any traps that had been laid.

I padded forward slowly as the solo wolf waited, standing at the top of a hill, their head faced down toward us. Kiel had been near the rear of the army, supervising the stragglers, so I knew it would take him some time to reach me. Setting my pace to appear firm but wary, I approached.

If it *were* a loyalist, their appearance there made little sense. The field was a terrible place to corner us. We had exits in every direction and could see oncoming foes from many miles away through the undulating terrain.

When I was halfway between my army and the single wolf, Kiel joined me, having finally caught up. I made a questioning noise about what the hell was going on. He had no idea.

I came to a stop some thirty feet in front of the wolf and waited, carefully watching the brown-furred animal, waiting for it to act. When it finally started toward us, I breathed a sigh of relief. Whatever would happen, it was here to talk, not to spring a trap, else it wouldn't expose itself so much.

A moment later, my relief turned to shock.

"*Gare?*" I stuttered as I shifted to human form as well. "What are you doing here?"

“Hi, Jada,” he said, his attention focused on me, though he gave Kiel a nod.

For his part, Kiel was still looking back where Gare had come, his nose in the air. Was he trying to tell me something about where Gare had come from? He didn’t seem alarmed. Just ... curious.

“I’ll be honest,” I said, trying to unobtrusively brace myself. “I hadn’t expected to ever see you again.”

Was he there to settle the score with me? I didn’t want to be caught by surprise if he attacked. Kiel’s body language didn’t seem to think that was a problem, but then, he hadn’t been there when I’d told Gare about his father. Hadn’t seen the fury in his eyes. I wouldn’t let my guard down.

“I wasn’t sure you were going to either,” Gare admitted, some of the tension leaving his body. “After I left, I vowed I was done with it all. That I was moving on, letting you guys do the work. That it wasn’t for me. My mother was alone, and she needed me.”

I grimaced. Habit told me to apologize again, but I didn’t want Gare to think I was just saying it to say it. It was better, I decided, to let him talk.

“But then I heard about Arcadia,” he said, his head coming up, his eyes full of fury. “And I knew I had to be a part of it. No matter what.”

The anger burned bright but petered out before I could respond. It was replaced equally quickly with a tear.

“I also wanted to thank you,” he said, staring directly at me.

“*Thank me?*” I asked incredulously. Why would he *ever* want to thank *me*? I was the one who’d gotten his father killed.

“Yes,” he said. “For telling me how he died. I ... I understand why you didn’t at first. I’ll never like that you put it off, but I *understand*.”

“Not that it helps, but *I* don’t like that I did it,” I said. “It was a cowardly thing, and I regret it immensely. You deserved better. *He* deserved better.”

To my utter surprise, Gare smiled. “Yes, he did,” he said. Then he shrugged. “But thanks to you, we know *how* he died, and that means a lot. He gave his life for a cause that he thought was worth fighting for. Worth *dying* for, and that really was who he was as a person in the end.”

“What do you mean, ‘in the end’? He believed in the cause for many years. Didn’t he?”

Gare nodded. “He was a big believer, yes. I was very young when he became the head of the Lycaon cell. My mother nearly had a fit. She cussed him out big time for putting me at risk, or so I suspect. She won’t admit to it. Because of that, I think, my father was big on *talk* but not so big on action. Until the end. Until you two showed him there was a reason to fight. And that *reason* is each other. It’s a message I think got lost by a lot of people over the years.”

“That’s why we’re doing what we’re doing,” I said. “Trying to show everyone out there the true strength of our people. The people themselves. They don’t need to be herded like sheep. We need to live free. To let the winds guide us, not some crusty immortal prick.”

Gare smiled. “As it so happens, I agree.”

“I’m glad,” I said.

He stepped forward and wrapped me in an embrace, yet another surprise for the day. I hugged him back.

“I forgive you,” he whispered in my ear. “Not that you truly did anything dastardly, but I wanted you to know. I hold no grudge or ill will. Not to you.”

Blinking back a couple of tears, I nodded. “Thank you. I’ll do my best to make sure you don’t regret it.”

“Sounds good,” he said, pulling back and giving me a smile. Then he glanced toward the rest of our army. Shifters were just milling around, waiting on us. “Would I be right in saying that you’re heading toward Nycitum and Lycaonus?”

“We’re going to finish this,” I growled. “Once and for all.”

“Good,” Gare said, the smile that curved his lips upward falling well short of his eyes and promising all sorts of pain for those in his way. “Let’s do this.”

“Glad to have you aboard,” I said. “That’s one more wolf Lycaonus will have to worry about.”

Gare frowned at me. “One more?”

“Are you not coming?” I was confused.

“I am.” He turned on his heel and started back up the hill, beckoning for me to follow. “Come on.”

I glanced at Kiel, who was still in his wolf form, and shrugged before heading after the shifter. Kiel yawned and followed along in our wake.

“Word about Arcadia and what the Alphas did there spread fast,” Gare said as I crested the hilltop. “So, I brought along a few friends who were just as pissed off as I was.”

“Holy shit,” I whispered, staring at the second army spreading out down the far side of the hill. A quick estimate said they were about three-quarters of our numbers. At least, somewhere around there.

“Friends, you say,” Kiel said as he shifted at last.

“If it can happen to Arcadia, then why not Lycaon?” Gare growled. “The people are *pissed*, Kiel. I just gave them a focal point. I’m surprised not more joined your people on their own.”

“We didn’t send anyone to Lycaon,” I said. “We felt it was too dangerous, too many loyalists there.”

“Not anymore,” Gare said. “We dealt with that. Most of the city rose up. These are the ones with experience. Former Wulfhere, or they just simply know how to fight. The rest are holding the city.”

I just stared at the vast seas of wolves, looking back and forth between them.

Maybe there *was* hope, after all.

Chapter Thirty-Four

The fierce cries of support that followed the merging of our two armies faded away with the darkening of night as realization set in.

It was the last night before we reached our destination. The final time where all of us would be together. Many in the army didn't know one another. Most were strangers, but that didn't matter. Bonds had been forged in the days leading up to our departure, and they had further solidified when our ranks swelled. We were fighting for what was *right*, which meant we were friends.

Many of those friends would die tomorrow, no matter what we did. But more would die if I couldn't live up to my end. People who had marched hundreds of miles, thousands in some far-flung cases, would do so just to die on a foreign field. Such were the realities of war.

Come on, Fate. Where are you? These people need your help. My help. They need us. They're counting on it. Please don't let me down. Show me that you're there and ready!

Still nothing but silence.

Fists clenched, teeth grinding, I tried again. And again.

No answer.

Around me, the warriors who came to fight for freedom were settling in for the night. Those who had never seen battle before were gathered around campfires, telling boisterous stories and laughing heartily as if nothing bothered them. That was their brave face, to pretend they weren't scared.

Those who *had* seen fields of slaughter were getting the one thing every warrior wished they could have more of: Sleep.

Still others found ways to live in the moment and remind themselves—and the person they lay with—that they were alive. Sex was the ultimate reminder of life, and nobody blamed them for finding what bit of privacy they could in the face of potential death.

Yet more, those who could do none of the above, sat alone, staring into the abyss of their own minds.

I made my rounds through the camp, thanking those who looked to me and ignoring those who wanted to be left alone. It was important, in my mind at least, that those who had called for their support were visible and easily reachable. I wanted them to know we cared.

Clive and Andi weren't where I'd left them when I returned. They, too, were probably out among the warriors, giving reassurances and being seen. Everyone knew our leadership quartet, along with Gare, were the ones at the heart of it all. But though we may be the hands guiding it, it was a stand for all. A line had been drawn in the ground, and we weren't going back.

"Hi," I said as I approached Kiel, who sat staring into a slowly dying fire.

Exactly as he'd been when I'd left to wander.

He grunted in greeting.

"Nope," I said, crossing the fire to stand at his side. "Not good enough. Get up."

I gave my words a couple of seconds to percolate through his clearly distracted mind. After a four-count, he stirred and looked up at me. "Pardon?"

"Get up," I said.

Frowning, he climbed to his feet.

"Good. Now, follow me." I grabbed his hand and started walking, not bothering to give him a chance to protest.

"Where are we going?" he asked, trailing along behind me.

I spun and pressed a finger to his lips. "Hush," I said gently, then kept walking, leading him away from the fire. Away from the others. Away from the camp.

Away from everything except for myself.

After five minutes, I stopped walking and faced him. At some point, he must have understood what was going on and

was now opening his mouth to speak.

Again, I pressed my finger to his mouth, shaking my head. It was not the time for words. It was a time for remembrance. Of what it meant to be alive. Of what it meant to simply *be*. But not alone. With someone.

With each other.

Gently pushing, I laid Kiel on the ground. I ran a hand up his leg, brushing against his cock, which was already stirring. My fingers closed around his shaft as he grew harder, thickening him under my touch.

Turning around, I lowered my groin to his face.

He welcomed me with an open mouth and hands around my hips, guiding me, controlling me even as I sat on him.

A wordless moan escaped into the night as he licked me, his tongue pressing through my lips and finding my clit with expert precision. He started slowly, warming me up, teasing me with every flick, every lick, every single motion. My fingers dug into his chest, and my eyes latched on to his cock, watching it twitch.

Unable to help myself, I got fully down on my hands and knees, my mouth gobbling up the tip of his cock eagerly, swirling my tongue around the head and letting my saliva coat him. The shiny skin of his head glistened with wetness in the moonlight.

Kiel groaned as I went deep, taking him far back into my throat, letting every inch of him slide through my lips as I sucked gently, one of my hands resting on his quad so I could massage his sac.

Meanwhile, his tongue moved faster against my clit, his facial hair tickling the inside of my thighs in all the best ways, the roughness igniting full-body shivers. His hands gripped my ass, pulling my cheeks apart and exposing every inch of me to his mouth.

I moaned through a mouthful of rock-solid cock as every muscle in my body quivered. I was close, so very close. Just a little bit more, and I would—

Everything tightened all at once as light exploded behind my eyelids. I choked and gagged on his cock, drawing it deeper into my throat. Almost his entire length was gobbled up greedily as I came *hard*, my hips pushing down into his face, held there by his hands even as they tried to buck and writhe.

His tongue worked like a whirlwind, never slowing. I wanted to cry out from the sensitivity, but his hands effectively pinned me down. I shook and bounced as my gag reflex threatened to hit the limit, but without warning, I crossed a line, and my clit was suddenly demanding *more* not less. I groaned, saliva drooling from my lips down his cock as I knew I was going to come *again*.

Seconds later, my pussy exploded with pleasure. I saw stars at that point from choking on his cock, but I didn't care. I was so overwhelmed by the heart-pounding orgasm tearing its way through my body that I couldn't stop. I was helpless, too busy moaning and crying out as his tongue punished me with pleasure until I sagged against him.

Kiel only let me rest for a second before casually picking me up and balancing me on my feet. In one smooth motion, he entered me, pushing all the way in until my hips bounced against his.

Again, my fingernails dug deep into his chest, leaving red marks as I came for a third time, rocking hard against him as my pussy walls contracted firmly around his cock, everything vibrating nonstop from the waves of pleasure that were contracting and relaxing my muscles.

Kiel held me, his giant hands wrapped firmly around my ribs, keeping me upright even as my head lolled to the side and my body refused to respond to anything, too overstimulated to behave properly.

When I finally slumped forward, breathing heavily, trying to regain some semblance of mental ability, Kiel decided that it was finally time to actually *fuck me*.

He slid his hands down to my hips, lifted them high, and pulled me back down on top of his still rock-solid cock. I gasped and cried out. And again. And again. He shook my

entire body, his hips thrusting up to meet mine, driving his cock deep into my pussy, filling it completely with every stroke.

At some point, I came again.

And then again. I was nothing but a ragdoll in his grip, everything bouncing wildly, my body his to take, to use as he pleased, and he did, over and over again. I couldn't control anything but the tiny sliver of my mind that enabled me to keep breathing throughout.

Everything was a blur, one climax after another blending into each other. Was it six? Seven? I didn't know, and I doubted I'd ever be able to count. It was all so intense. I couldn't even summon the coherence to lift my head as my ass cheeks bounced and rippled with every thrust of his hips.

And then, all at once, the only thing I knew was *warmth*. It erupted out of his cock, filling me, the sudden change in sensation causing a tiny orgasm to pulse within me. It was all I had left, the only energy my body still contained, but it was enough.

Kiel grabbed my shoulders as I flopped forward on his chest, all but passing out from the letdown of the roughest, most intense fucking I'd ever had. My intentions had been to make love under the moonlight, but our bodies had apparently thought otherwise.

Not once, throughout it all, had we exchanged any words. All that needed to be said was said with our bodies.

I smiled at him even as I drifted off into a post-sex stupor. Did he smile back? Or was that a hallucination? I wasn't sure.

Kiel rolled me onto my back among the grasses.

Just before I passed out, a single shooting star streaked across the entire sky, bright enough to leave a trail.

And it was green ...

Chapter Thirty-Five

We approached Nycitum from the far east, skirting along the mountains, staying well away from the roads. Moving an army that large—we numbered near ten thousand strong—without being seen by scouts or regular travelers would be difficult *without* doing it on the main thoroughfare leading right up to the main gates.

The problem wasn't getting to within visual distance of Nycitum without being spotted. I was fairly certain we'd managed that, based on what I could see as I hunkered down in the short grasses beside Kiel, staring at the city.

"They aren't ready for us," Gare observed.

"Maybe not," Andi said, "but we still have the little problem of getting from here to the gates without them *getting* ready. If they close up shop, we're going to have a hell of a time getting past those walls."

"Could we just go down the exhaust shafts again, like you guys did?" Clive offered. "It would be slow going, but it would get us into the heart of the citadel."

"If they're smart, they'll be keeping everything lit and burning," Kiel said, killing that idea where it lay. "We'd never make it. No, we need to somehow get to the gates without them thinking we're their enemies. So they *let* us in."

"What about ore carts?" I suggested. "That would let us get right up to the gate. We could probably pack ten or twenty people into each one."

Kiel nodded. "I was thinking the same. It's not that unusual to see several carts come together. We could hijack the next one that comes along."

"Who knows when that will be," Gare said. "Can we stay hidden that long?"

It wasn't just staying hidden we had to worry about, either. Our army was currently riding a wave of righteous anger and determination because of what had happened to Arcadia. The

longer we waited, the more that wave would diminish. We couldn't afford that. We had to attack, soon.

"What if we *give* them a target?" I said, an idea coming to me. "A distraction, to draw their attention away. We'll prey on their assumptions."

"How so?" Kiel asked, looking sideways at me.

"First, you're going to have to be the big, bad guy you've been made out to be. Then you're going to have to chase all of us helpless women." I feigned a pouting, watery-eyed look.

Kiel snorted. "They won't buy that."

"*You* wouldn't. But these are Wulfhere. All male soldiers? Come on, they're going to buy it without a second thought," I said.

Andi nodded in agreement.

"All right," Kiel said, glancing at Gare, who wisely looked away, unwilling to comment. "So, what's the rest of the idea?"

"*Help!*"

We stumbled over the ridgeline and down toward the tiered city of Nycitum, over a dozen women in various stages of undress, all clothing ripped and torn. Two of us carried a third who was limping, her leg covered in blood.

Behind us came a pack of naked, savage men, chasing us down toward the city. They were covered in dirt.

"*Please!*" Andi shouted toward the guards at the far distance gate. "*Please help us!*"

One of the women screamed and went down as a man grabbed her and tackled her, eagerly ripping the last of her clothing to shreds as he pinned her wrists to the ground behind her head, half-howling in triumph.

The other men came on, while we ran as fast as we could toward the gate. The soldiers had stirred, the sounds of our cries carrying easily to their ears.

On we ran, keeping together in a pack. The men closed the distance. Another woman went down screaming as she was hauled from her feet, a filthy male ready to claim possession of her body.

A full two-thirds of the guards were charging out to meet us now, swords drawn as they charged. Seeing safety ahead, we increased our pace, still crying out from time to time as the men harried us. But they, too, had “seen” the oncoming soldiers and were getting wary about it.

Just a little more, I urged mentally, impressed that our acting skills had gotten us that far. Even the women who’d been taken down by the so-called savages were doing a good job of pretending, which had to be hard when it was their mates who had grabbed them.

But the soldiers came on none-the-wiser.

“To the city, ladies!” the one in command hollered as they arrived. “We’ll take care of these brutes.”

They swept past us, charging after the men, who slowed, and then began to retreat back up the hill.

Half a dozen guards waited for us at the gate, waving us through.

“Oh, *thank you*,” I moaned as pitifully as possible. “Thank you so much. You have no idea what those ... those *monsters* did to us.”

“Of course, ma’am. That’s what we’re here for, to protect,” the nearest soldier said, dipping his head.

“Which is why I’m sorry,” I said as I decked him on the way by, absolutely leveling the man with a surprise blow.

The other women jumped on the guards, quickly rendering them unconscious and stripping them of swords. On we went, sweeping through the gates and into the stairwells to either side, racing to get to the gate controls.

Behind us, the “savages” had stopped retreating and were waiting for the soldiers to reach them. I saw the first line of

wolves come over the hill, and then I charged inside after the rest of my team to secure the gates.

Bells were ringing by the time I reached the upper level of the gatehouse, where guards were holding back a line of *extremely* angry female shifters and trying to stop them long enough to get the thick metal doors closed.

We couldn't let that happen.

With a shriek, I launched myself over the lines, curling up like a cannonball and landing hard on two shifters trying to spin the wheels that would close the doors. We fell to the ground in a heap. I got up first and grabbed the nearest by the ankle, tossing him into the backs of his comrades as they tried to stand.

The group stumbled forward and went down, and women swept over them as chaos reigned supreme. The guards had us outnumbered and were far more heavily armored, but our surprise was complete, and the fact that we were naked and screaming was delaying any reaction from new arrivals just long enough for us to gain an advantage.

From below, the rumble of many thousands of feet could be heard, along with the savage howls of warriors.

"The gates are breached!" someone shouted. "Retreat! The gates are breached!"

The guards attacking us fell back against the walls as more of our ragtag army came up the stairs, keeping the silver-armored foes on their heels.

"For Arcadia!" someone shouted, and a wordless roar erupted from ten thousand throats as we stormed the city.

Kiel and the rest of our leadership group found me near the base of the doors.

"It worked."

"I told you it would," I said, punching Kiel lightly on the shoulder. I didn't smile. Too many bodies littered the ground nearby. Most of them wore silver armor, but plenty did not.

That would only get worse as we drove deeper into the city and the Wulphere organized.

“We have to get going, though. If Lycaonus can get his men into some sort of cohesive formation, we’ll never hold. Surprise is our advantage. We must use it,” Kiel said.

Everyone nodded in unison. The plan was set. We all knew what was at stake. Clive, Andi, and Gare headed off on their mission, leaving me alone with Kiel. The two of us against a monster.

“Anything more?” Kiel asked as we stared at the streets littered with bodies.

Bodies that would’ve been spent in vain if I couldn’t come through with my end of the bargain.

“Not yet,” I said. “She’ll be there, though.”

“How can you be sure?”

“*Because she has to be!*” I shouted, not wanting to think of the alternative.

We set out, following our army up the tiers of Nycitum as we battled Lycaonus’ forces level by level, until finally the doors to the Grand Forge lay open before us.

Inside was a giant courtyard. Outside was our remaining army. The city secured. Only one thing left to do.

Kill an unkillable Alpha.

Kiel and I walked in through the final set of gates. There, at the far side of the courtyard, awaited Lycaonus, standing at the top of a set of stairs leading deep into the mountain. He held a sword in his right hand, tip resting on the ground, and a dagger strapped to his waist, a pointless backup given the power he already controlled.

“I always knew it would come down to you,” Lycaonus said. “All these years, my old friend, and it’s come back to you.”

“I’m not your friend,” Kiel spat. “Maybe once, a long time ago. But we are not those people anymore, are we?”

“No, I suppose we aren’t,” Lycaonus agreed. “I see you’ve got yourself a woman now. About time.”

Kiel shook his head. “She’s far more than ‘my woman.’ Not that you would understand.”

“You can’t stop me,” Lycaonus cackled, resting one finger on top of his sword’s hilt and moving it in a circle, the tip still resting on the stone stair. “Not with this in my hand.”

“We’ll see about that,” Kiel growled, looking at me. “Anything?”

“Not. Yet.” I said stiffly.

“So, uh, what do we do, then?”

Lycaonus abruptly stopped twirling his sword and snatched it up, leveling it at us.

“You die,” he said calmly as a bright green spear of light shot from the tip.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Kiel and I leaped away from one another as the beam swung through an arc proscribed by Lycaonus' arm.

I landed, rolling into a ball and looking back as the beam melted through stone and metal wherever it touched it, boiling it away into nothing. If that touched either of us ...

Where are you? I called into my mind. *I could really use your help right about now. We've got Lycaonus in the open. We can do this. I just need your help!*

Only silence greeted my plea.

You can't sit this one out, damnit! We're doing this for you, Fate. Stop cowering in your temple and help us!

Lycaonus laughed from the top of step as Kiel and I got to our feet, looking at each other warily, our gazes on the sword. For all the power it held, it was a thoroughly plain piece of metal, unadorned by any jewelry or markings. A simple steel blade, with a black wrapped handle.

"Your army will be as nothing before me," the Alpha said. "You've sentenced them all to death, I hope you know that. Their blood will be on *your* hands."

"Says the guy who intends to kill them," I growled. "That's the thing about people like you. You don't realize *you're* the problem. You intend to kill them. That means their blood is on *you*. Moron. You don't *have* to kill them. You could surrender and—"

"Never!" Lycaonus screamed.

I was already leaping away as the beam of pure emerald light lashed forth once more, slicing through courtyard stone and wall alike. One of the metal doors sagged and fell inward to land with a terrible *clang*.

"This is *my* empire!" Lycaonus shouted, waving his sword back and forth between us.

Kiel and I had moved far enough away that he could only hit one of us at a time with his blasts. But he didn't strike again. He just stood there. I frowned, glancing over at Kiel. He'd seen it, too.

With a cry, we raced at Lycaonus, swords at the ready. His beam was limited. That was going to be our only advantage. I came in high, raising my blade over my head to chop it down.

He shook his head and swung his blade casually upward in an arc that would take my head off as well as my blade.

"Too easy," he grunted as his sword sliced through mine like butter and continued upward.

Only I'd known my blade wouldn't stand a chance against his. I'd seen it happen in the mountains. So, I was already dropping to my knees, sliding *under* his lazy strike, the ragged tip of my sword slicing across his stomach.

Kiel was coming in hot from the other side, but Lycaonus whipped his blade back around with a savage sharpness that forced Kiel to duck away. I rolled out of my slide, gathering my feet under me to jump.

At that instant, the ground exploded behind me as another energy beam struck it. The force of stone shattering from the superheated touch flung me away. I hit the fallen door and rolled into the corner of the gateway, pain blossoming everywhere.

"Ow," I groaned, trying to get to my feet, so I could move before he struck again.

Before I could, a blade settled across my throat. I went still.

"Stop!" Lycaonus barked as Kiel tried to come at him from a different angle. "Cease your attack, or she dies."

Kiel's head whipped around and spotted the new arrival. "You," he growled. "I should have killed you instead of throwing you off the damn mountain."

"A mistake, indeed," Lycaonus' Nehringi said. "One that you will not make again."

“That’s for sure,” Kiel growled. “This time, I’m going to take your head off.”

“I would truly love to see you try,” Lycaonus chuckled. “But first, you must give it up. It’s over, old friend. You’ve lost. Put your blade down or watch her bleed out in front of you. Your choice.”

Kiel bared his teeth angrily, his eyes fixed on me as the sword fell to the ground, asking me a question with his gaze.

Closing my eyes, I didn’t call out into the emptiness of my mind, the place where Fate had once been. That time, I *reached out*.

It’s now or never. You want to stop him? Let’s stop him. Come to me!

I grabbed for the power I’d once felt coursing through my veins ...

And I got an answer.

My eyes snapped open, locking on to Kiel. There wasn’t a need for me to speak. He had the answer he needed. The one we’d been waiting for.

“I will *never* stop,” he growled at Lycaonus. “I will come for her. And then for you.”

The Alpha rolled his eyes. “What do you even see in such a pitiful thing? Why do you *do* this? You could rule from my side, my second-in-command. It would be like the old days again.”

“I do this,” Kiel snarled, “because I *love* her. Because she has shown me that even those who have done as much bad as I have deserve second chances. She taught me that, just as she taught me to feel again. To care. To fall in love. She’s everything to me. And that’s something you will never know, not in all your years.”

Lycaonus spat and brought the sword up. But Kiel was ready. He dodged to the side and flung himself straight at the Alpha. Lycaonus was ready, however, and the blade flicked to

the side, impaling Kiel through the stomach as he charged. It emerged out the back in a spray of blood.

“You fool,” Lycaonus spat as Kiel wormed his way closer on the blade, blood pouring out around him from both entries of the wound. “You could never best me. Now, you’ll die.”

Kiel leaned forward and grabbed Lycaonus by the throat, hauling the Alpha closer. “You forgot one important thing, you sonofabitch,” he snarled. “I’m immortal, too.”

His other hand snatched the dagger from Lycaonus’ waist.

There was a gasp and then a *crunch*, and the blade of the Nehringi fell away from my throat as the assassin toppled over, Andi’s blade sticking out from where his heart was.

At the same time, I closed my eyes and *willed* the power of Fate circling in my breast out through my hands. The free shards of Fate burst from my fingertips in a swirling stream, following my commands as they embedded themselves into the dagger Kiel was wielding.

Kiel whipped the blade down. Not into Lycaonus.

But into the sword.

Both blades shattered on impact, throwing Kiel and Lycaonus across the courtyard and toppling the rest of us over as eight shards of the goddess were freed in one moment. Emerald light billowed into the sky, a circular torrent of energy shooting skyward, a beacon for any and all to see from a thousand miles around.

The wind howled as the energy pouring forth from both broken blades merged together.

Just as fast as it had come, it was gone. Reality itself seemed to sag into the emptiness that followed such a display.

“Thank you,” I said to Andi over my shoulder. “Much appreciated.”

“Not a problem. Did we ... did we do it?” she asked as Clive came to stand at her side protectively—not that she needed it.

“I think so,” I said as Kiel got to his feet, his wound already starting to heal.

Going to his side, I helped him to his feet. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” he said, then groaned in pain. “Correction: I *will* be okay.”

Despite that, we weren’t done yet. With him leaning heavily on me, Kiel and I made our way across the empty courtyard to where Lycaonus lay on his back, staring at the sky.

“*Now*, it’s over,” Kiel said as we stopped alongside the Alpha. “No more of you. No more rebellion. No *more*.”

Lycaonus turned his head slightly to look up at us. “Coward,” he sneered.

Kiel’s foot came down on the now very mortal Lycaonus’ neck, crushing it flat.

“Heal from that,” he spat, and turned away as the last surviving Alpha choked to death.

We walked back to the gate.

“It’s done,” I said with a sigh. “We actually did it.”

Kiel shook his head. “Not quite. There’s one more thing I have to do.”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

“What is this place?” I asked, my fingers tightly intertwined with his.

We stood in a small clearing at the center of the forest. It had taken us three days of hiking to reach that point, far on the western coast north of Helisson. The ocean itself was yards away, the surf no longer audible, but it was less than a mile to a beautiful pristine beach, where we’d spent the night in each other’s arms under the starry sky.

That morning, Kiel had woken me and, hand in hand, led me into the forest without a word or explanation. Just as he had for the entire trip after we left Nycitum. All he’d said was that it was “the last thing” he had to do.

As I looked around, it was clear that the clearing had once been *something*. There were cobblestones mostly buried underfoot, and the lines of crumbling stonework could be seen here and there. Lines that were far too straight to be natural.

“This,” Kiel said solemnly, “used to be my home. You are standing in the center of what used to be Callise. Home of the Calli pack. My people.”

My free hand came up to cover my mouth.

“This is all that’s left of them,” he explained. “Some stones in the ground. And my memory. Nothing else.”

“We’re going to change that,” I said, reminding him of my promise. “You’re going to tell their stories. The world will know the truth about them.”

“I know,” he said, still clearly lost in his memories.

Still holding tightly to his hand, I wandered around the clearing and then into the forest, touching the walls and trying to picture what it would have looked like back in the day.

“I didn’t know that there was anything left,” I said.

“Nobody does. The Alphas destroyed it thoroughly, then erased any and all evidence they could, so nobody could find

it. Not that they would want to, given what the Alphas said about my people.”

“Oh, Kiel,” I whispered, leaning on his head. “My love.”

The tremor that ran through him when I said that warmed me to the core.

“After seven hundred years, this is all there is. But it’s where I went when I needed to find myself, to find balance.”

“And you need that now?” I asked quietly, letting myself be led back to the clearing, which I could now see was a former courtyard.

“No,” he said, picking his way carefully to one spot, where he knelt down and started peeling back vegetation and growth. “I’ve found balance.”

“You have?”

“Yes. She’s standing right next to me.”

I grinned, a flush of warmth running up my neck. Who could have known there was a romantic in there after all? But Kiel sure was demonstrating he had a lot more to give than just being a fighter.

To my surprise, Kiel started hauling bricks out of the ground, slowly but surely revealing an entrance.

“This is what I came for,” he said, gesturing for me to follow him into the underground chamber. “The last piece of the puzzle. A final end to everything.”

The chamber was small, perhaps ten feet wide by twenty long. And at the far end, nestled in a hollowed-out tree stump, was an emerald stone perhaps the size of a human head.

“A Fate Stone,” I whispered, shaking my head. “Of course!”

Somehow, despite it all, I’d never put it all together. There was no *way* Kiel could have lived all that time if he didn’t have a stone. But we’d never talked about it, the stories never mentioned a ninth *stone*, just a ninth *alpha*. But, of course, he had one!

“Fate deserves to be truly free,” Kiel said. “This has been my biggest source of hypocrisy. All these years, I tried to destroy those belonging to the Alphas, all the while harboring my own.”

“I don’t think it’s hypocrisy. You knew if you destroyed yours, if you died, then all knowledge of the *truth* would die with you. The rebellion would die. And Fate would never be free.”

“Maybe,” he said, shrugging. “Maybe not.”

He took the stone in his hand, holding it up to eye height. We both stared into the emerald depths.

“She’s ready,” I whispered, feeling a tingle in the back of my mind. “And she understands why you did what you did.”

“So, she doesn’t hold a grudge?” he asked.

“No,” I said with a laugh.

“Good.”

Then he smashed the stone against the floor.

A ball of green light burst from the fragments, whirling around us twice and then shooting out through the entrance and into the light before disappearing entirely.

“It’s done,” Kiel said. “Fate is now truly free.”

“How do you feel?” I asked. “Being mortal again?”

“Everything aches,” he joked. “How else do you expect a septa-centurion to feel?”

“Are those even words?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “I’m old. I can’t remember anything anymore.”

“Oh, shut up!” I giggled, whacking him.

He growled playfully and snatched me up, kissing me thoroughly enough that the world began to spin from lack of oxygen.

“Phew,” I said as he finally set me back down. “I’m dizzy.”

Then the room was suddenly filled with green light as a figure appeared near the entrance. A woman, vibrant and free.

“Thank you,” Fate said. “Both of you.”

We both nodded.

“There’s not much I can grant you, but if there is, ask it,” she said, spreading her hands wide.

“Nothing for me,” Kiel said. “Being able to undo all the bad I did is enough for me.”

Fate smiled. “Of course. And you?” she asked, turning to me.

I looked away, smiling. “There *is* one thing,” I said, feeling all shy and girlish for the first time in forever.

“Name it.”

“Well,” I said awkwardly, “I never *did* get my Fate Night. And I know those aren’t really things anymore. But, well, everyone always said you *know* if someone is your mate. And I was just wondering if, you know ...”

I looked over at Kiel, who was doing his best to fight a big smile.

Fate laughed, a light titter that carried over us.

“You don’t need me to confirm what you already know,” she said. Then she was gone, just like that.

Leaving me alone with my mate.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

I prepared myself for the unrelenting downward weight on my shoulders as I approached the stone marker, one of dozens in the fenced-off field. To a neutral observer, there was nothing special, nothing different, about that one compared to the others. It stood near the same height, was of similar color, and had no unique markings on it.

To me, it was the only one that existed. The rest might as well be invisible, objects I was intellectually aware had meaning to others, but to me, they were just pieces of stone. That one, *that* was the one that mattered.

Yet as I reached out, dragging my fingers along the curved top, that brutal, miserable wave of guilt never materialized.

“Hey, sis,” I said, dropping to a squat as I traced the outline of the letters etched into the surface.

Lanna Saunders

I braced myself again for a wave of self-loathing, of *she would still be here if you hadn't fucked up* thoughts. They always greeted me at Lanna's grave like a deluge of rain. But not that time.

“Listen,” I said, tapping the stone gently to get her attention. “I miss you. I wish you could be here. I wish you could meet Kiel. I think you would have liked him. He treats me well, makes me laugh. And he's pretty cute, too.”

Standing nearby, Kiel chuckled at my observation but refrained from speaking. This was a me moment, and he wasn't about to ruin that.

“There's something else,” I said, head bowing. “I know I've always come here and apologized for what happened. As if that would make a difference, as if it could bring you back. But it can't. I know that now, Lanna. That's another thing Kiel's helped me with. He's helped me realize it's not my fault. That I can't go on blaming myself for what happened to you. I hope you can understand.”

I fell silent, waiting, wondering if there would be a sign, any sort of indication from the universe that Lanna was okay with my self-forgiveness, or if she would hold a grudge.

But nothing happened. No thunder sounded in the distance. No birds sang in raucous chorus. Simply silence.

“Thank you,” I whispered, pressing my head to the gravestone, wishing against all wishes that I could talk to Lanna one more time. Just to say goodbye properly.

But that wasn’t the way it worked. I couldn’t control time any more than I could have controlled Fate. Though, I guess perhaps I’d gotten closer than most.

“I’ll be back,” I continued in a more normal voice. “But it’s going to be some time. We’re going to go out west to work on a big project. You see, Kiel’s home is there, and we’re going to rebuild it. Uncover what we can. Make records of what we find, of what we learned. The true story of his people *will* be told. I made a promise, and I intend to follow through. But don’t worry, you’ll be in good hands. I think you would approve of the new Alpha of Arcadia.”

In the wake of the power vacuum left by the death of the rulers, finding leadership had been necessary. Even before the time of the immortals, each of the packs had been led by an Alpha. That, it seemed, wouldn’t change. But for the first time in hundreds of years, that Alpha had been *chosen*.

And Clive had won.

Just the day before yesterday, I stood beside him as he was crowned Alpha. Unsurprisingly, Andi stood next to him. We’d all had quite the chuckle when they realized none of us were surprised by it, much to the embarrassment of the duo who’d thought they’d kept everything hidden from sight.

“Mom and Dad are rebuilding, by the way,” I added. “So, they’ll still be around to visit. I don’t know how long we’ll be gone, but you can bet your ass I’ll be thinking of you constantly, sis. But there’s a lot to do, a lot of damage that has to be *undone*. I hope you understand.”

I patted the gravestone, brushing off a few pieces of moss clinging to it.

“I love you,” I said softly. “Oh, and also, I kinda sorta saved the world. So, *there*.”

She was my sister, after all. Bragging rights were kind of important.

Standing, I grabbed Kiel’s hand as we strolled toward the cemetery’s exit.

“Thank you for coming with me.” I leaned my head on his shoulder.

He kissed the top of my head. “Anything for you, my love,” he rumbled. “Anything for you.”

“In time,” I said, squeezing his hand tight. “For now, though, the next little bit is about *you*, mate of mine.”

Kiel growled happily. He liked it when I called him my mate. Something he’d been deprived of for centuries on end. But no longer.

“Just remember our promise,” he said.

“I will,” I replied, shedding my robe and hanging it on a post just outside the gates.

Kiel grunted, also disrobing. “Good. Because if now is about me, the future is about *us*.”

Together, we shifted and ran east. Toward the coast. Toward Callise.

Toward *our future*.

THE END

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About the Author

Riley Storm

Riley is one of those early morning people you love to hate, because she swears she doesn't need caffeine, even though the coffee-maker is connected to her smartphone. She lives in a three-story townhouse by the good graces of a tabby cat who rules the house, the couch, the table, well, basically everywhere. When she's not groveling for forgiveness for neglecting to pet her kitty enough, Riley is strapped into her writing chair coming up with crazy worlds where she can make her own decisions of when feeding time is and how much coffee can be drunk without her friends—of which she has three—holding yet another intervention that they threaten to post on the internet.

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