

CLAIMED BY THE WOLF

LOST
IN THE
BROKEN
WOODS

LOLA GLASS

lost in the broken woods

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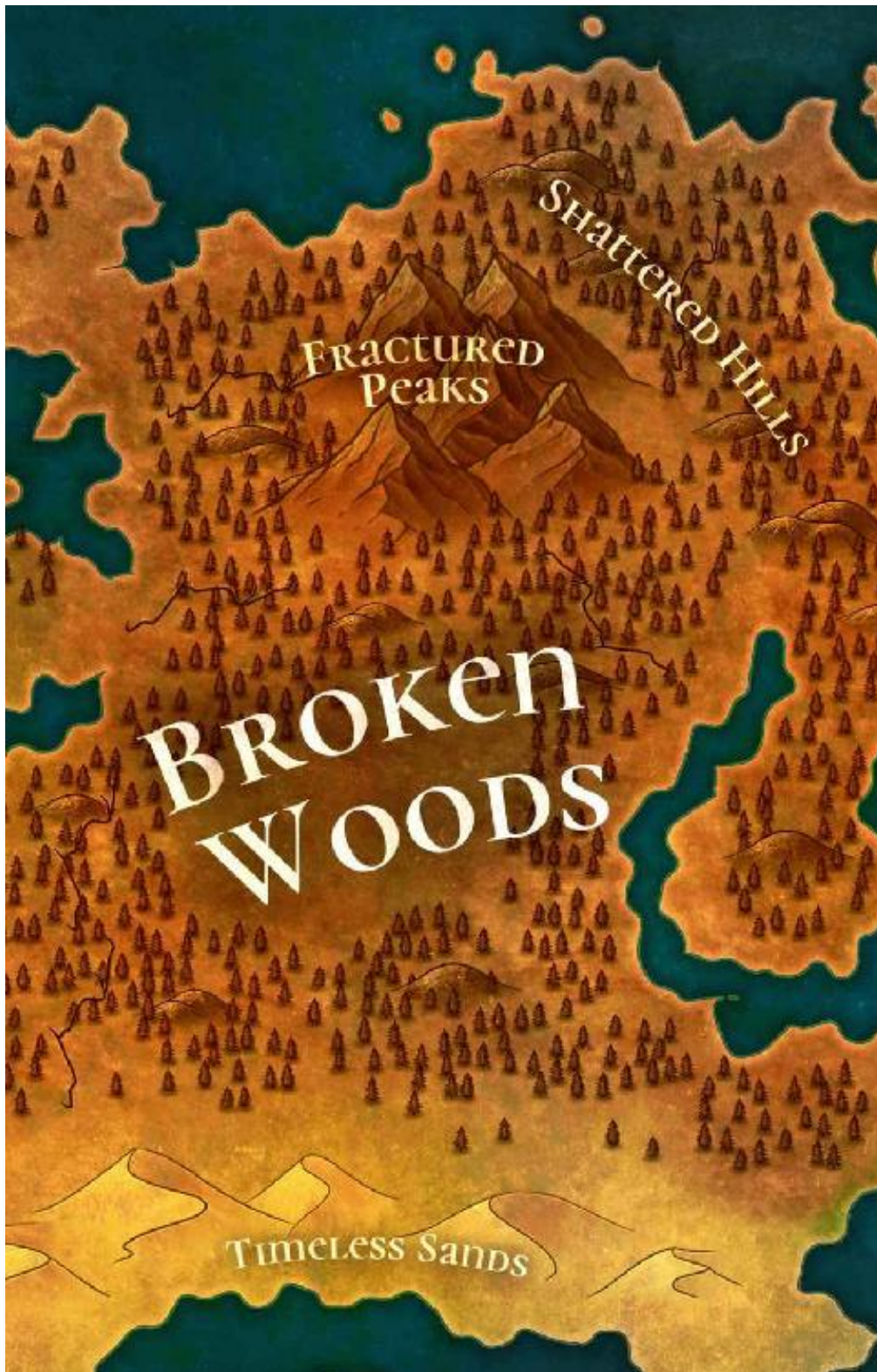
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*To all the fictional big, bad wolves
And all the women who wouldn't mind their great big teeth ;)*



one

EZRA

MY FADED BLUE flip-flops burned a trail in the asphalt as I hurried back to my car. Rain poured from the sky, gluing my long, wet hair to my face and arms.

I made it to the driver's seat in record time and plopped down, heaving my heavy bags of groceries onto the passenger seat with a huff. Tugging the strawberry-blond strands off my cheeks, I shut the door and let my gaze move over the parking lot around me.

Most people didn't seem to mind the rain. Some had even thought ahead enough to bring umbrellas. A few were rushing, like I had.

I supposed rain was normal in Savannah, Georgia, but I was new to it. Having lived in Phoenix, Arizona all my life, I was not well equipped for the rain.

Or the humidity.

Or much of anything else about living on my own in a new state, truthfully. I'd only been there for two weeks, and I was struggling.

My grandparents had raised me, but I buried Grandma a few months before my move, after a long fight with cancer. Grandpa had passed on two years earlier, so I was twenty-two-years-old and completely alone in the world.

I had a shiny new teaching degree and a hefty inheritance, but I was reluctant to use either of them. Neither felt... right.

Nothing had felt right since I lost them, honestly.

With a sigh, I opened the candy bar I hadn't been able to resist throwing in with my groceries. I took a chocolatey bite as I turned my car on. The rain seemed to come and go quickly in Savannah sometimes, so I would wait it out a few minutes to see if it vanished before hitting the road again.

My phone refused to connect to the Bluetooth in my car—again—so I turned the music on and dropped it speakers-down in the cupholder to make the sound louder, and then leaned my head back against the seat.

My shorts were damp and uncomfortable thanks to the rain. My oversized white tee shirt was wet enough to make me regret wearing my favorite black bra, too. To top it off, there was probably mascara beneath my eyes, emphasizing the dark circles that had taken up residence beneath them months earlier.

Life was... fine.

I didn't have to worry about money, which I knew was a privilege.

And I mean, I was happy.

Or at least, happy-ish.

My grandma had always told me that if I could find one thing to be positive about every day, I'd look back and know I had a good life. When she asked what my *positives* were every day, I usually tried to come up with something that would make her smile.

I hadn't broken my ankle getting out of my car, unlike that one time when I was thirteen.

I hadn't fallen off my chair in science class, unlike the first day of my freshman year.

My lunch hadn't given me food poisoning, unlike the first Thanksgiving Grandpa tried making the turkey himself.

My eyes watered a bit at the memories, and I found myself coming up with a few new positives.

I hadn't fallen on my ass on my way out of the grocery store.

My new apartment was cozy.

I had a chocolate bar.

I took another bite of said chocolate, and the car beside me backed out and drove off. My gaze caught on a woman around my age, just beyond the space. She sat on the asphalt in the rain, with her face tilted up to the sky.

That was... strange.

I supposed some people weren't as rain-adverse as I was, but still. Sitting in a parking lot didn't seem safe.

She didn't notice me looking at her, and I debated my options.

Ignore her and drive away—which would undoubtedly lead to a significant amount of guilt and worry over her safety—or get out and see if she needed help.

I settled on the second one.

Even if she didn't want help, I couldn't leave her there without checking.

Shooting the skies a quick grimace, I stepped back out of my car. My candy bar was still in my hand, the closest thing I had to a weapon. It would be pretty near useless, unless she enjoyed chocolate as much as I did.

And who didn't enjoy chocolate?

“Hey!” I called out as I approached her.

She flashed me a smile, and I couldn't help but notice that she was beautiful, with long, curly white hair, dark skin, and big blue eyes. A shimmering purple gown emphasized her curves, making me wonder what the hell she was doing sitting in a parking lot.

I saw her mangled ankle poking out of the bottom of her dress and gasped, kneeling at her side. “You're bleeding! What happened?”

“My ankle is broken,” she said simply.

She seemed curiously unaffected by the injury.

Was she in shock or something?

“It looks worse than broken,” I said, lifting my gaze back to hers.

Her eyes were on my chocolate, of course.

“Here.” I handed her the candy bar, and she accepted it without hesitation, taking a large bite. “I should call an ambulance.”

“Oh, no. I’ll be alright. What’s your name?”

Her lack of worry was odd, to say the least.

“Ezra.” I tucked a long, slick strand of hair behind my ear and studied her ankle. My grandparents had plenty of injuries and illnesses when I was growing up, most of which had been caused by nothing more than aging while raising a little girl.

“Unique.”

“I know. My parents thought they were having a boy, and didn’t care enough to change it after I was born. My grandpa thought it was a strong name, so he convinced my grandma not to change it.”

“Hmm.”

“You have to go to the hospital.” I finally lifted my eyes back to the woman’s. Their color was such a bright blue it almost *glowed*.

My head jerked backward before I could soften my reaction.

What the hell?

Glowing eyes *definitely* weren’t normal, or caused by shock.

She grinned at me. “My magic is showing through already, isn’t it?”

“Your *magic*?”

She was insane.

The purple dress and sitting in a parking lot should’ve told me that much.

I should’ve stayed in my car, and—

Her hand landed on my cheek. Before I could pull myself away, a sphere of soft, white light swelled around us. She gripped my arms, and when I tried to jerk out of her grasp, proved far stronger than she looked.

The light around us faded slowly, and I found myself looking around at an entirely different landscape.

No, an entirely different *world*.

The dirt beneath my knees was an eerie shade of reddish brown, and I was surrounded by dead trees.

Or trees that *looked* dead?

Their trunks and branches were black and gnarled, without a single leaf on any of them. The bushes around them were the same, resembling nothing but the skeleton of a once-beautiful plant.

She'd somehow used magic to take me to the middle of what appeared to be a dead forest.

If I hadn't been able to feel the wind against my face and smell a strange scent in the air, I would've wondered if someone had drugged my candy bar.

"Take your treat. You'll need it." The woman released one of my wrists and handed back the chocolate.

I didn't take it, instead once again trying unsuccessfully to pull my wrist from her grip.

"Who are you? Where am I?" I demanded, my voice trembling.

"These are the Broken Woods in my world, Evare." Her lips parted in a tired smile, and I noticed her body seeming to droop a little. "Welcome home, Ezra. By now, the shifters will have begun their mate run. Soon, one will find you and claim you."

"*What?*"

"Eat your chocolate. Your mate won't hurt you." She set my candy on my thigh and patted me lightly on the knee with her free hand, still holding my wrist captive with the other. "I am

the sorceress Serae. After I rest, I'll return with another human. You will be safe with the male who claims you, despite his lust. And my magic changed you when you crossed the veil, so your words will translate naturally."

"His *what?*" I nearly yelled, barely hearing the translation bit.

She gave me one last exhausted smile. "You'll see. Good luck. If the shifter tries anything you don't like, act like you're about to bite him and he'll stop. Momentarily, at least." She winked at me, as if that was some sort of inside secret.

Then, she vanished.

I groaned, looking around the dead forest—err, Broken Woods—in hopes to find her nearby, but had no such luck.

Serae was gone.

My gaze lifted to the dark, dusky sky above me. Though the dead trees were massive, they didn't have leaves, so they didn't conceal the stars.

My eyes rounded when I saw two moons over my head.

I looked between them a few times just to make sure I wasn't imagining them.

Yeah, there were definitely *two* moons.

"Damn," I whispered.

I looked around the forest again as paranoia crept in. I hadn't processed everything that had happened yet—and I was pretty sure I would have a panic attack when I did.

"Positives," I whispered to myself. "There have to be positives."

I was... still wearing my favorite black bra.

Which, a glance downward proved, I could still see through my wet shirt.

Yay.

The Broken Woods smelled sort of spicy, which was kind of appealing.

That may or may not have been a good thing, considering their evil-sounding name.

Evare wasn't Earth.

That, at least, was a true positive in the situation.

Probably.

Maybe.

My Earth self had a degree in a field I no longer wanted to work in, and was entirely alone. Assuming Serae was telling the truth, at the very least, I wouldn't be alone in the near future.

I wasn't sure what she meant by the *mate* and *claim* things, but I'd figure it out if there was no other option.

However, I didn't want to touch the *lust* thing with a ten-foot pole. I'd fooled around with a few guys in high school and college, and had never really enjoyed it all that much. It seemed safe to say that I was not a lusty person at heart, or in general.

My gaze caught on the wrapper on my thigh, and I remembered one final positive:

I still had my chocolate bar.

two

EZRA

MY EYES LINGERED on the moons above me.

I finished off my candy way too quickly, and then had nothing to do but crinkle the plastic in my hand so I wouldn't lose my mind.

Though I realized I could've tried to run away, I had no idea where I'd go. And if I ran, there was a possibility that I'd run the wrong way and end up being taken by someone worse than Serae or her shifters.

She had said the shifters wouldn't hurt me. I didn't trust her, but... well, what reason did she have to lie? She had already stolen me from Earth and abandoned me in the dead forest.

So, I waited.

Slowly, the moons crept higher in the sky.

And I continued waiting, trying to work through the fact that I'd been transported to an entirely different world and was soon going to be *claimed*.

TWO OR THREE hours must've passed when I finally heard a long, low howl in the wind.

Dozens of others joined it, sending chills down my spine.

Wolves.

The shifters she had described must've been able to shift into wolves.

The damn sorceress had abandoned me in the forest to be claimed by a *werewolf*.

Shit.

I wasn't sure how far you could hear a wolf's howl, but it had to be far, didn't it?

I—

A scream escaped me as a massive, light gray wolf launched out of the trees. I was nowhere near fast enough to dodge him, so I threw my hands over my face to protect myself as I braced for impact.

The impact didn't come.

I slowly peeked my eyes open, and found a man in the wolf's place.

The most beautiful man I had ever seen.

He was circling me slowly, as if I were his prey, while his entire body emanated golden light.

His face was a masterpiece of chiseled lines and hard edges that made me want to run my fingers over them. His whitish-gray hair, and eyes that seemed to glow in the same shade, only made him more otherworldly.

And he towered over me, built with monstrous muscles and tattoos in shades of gray everywhere.

Everywhere, everywhere.

He was completely naked, which erased any questions I may have otherwise had about his physique.

Or the gorgeous bubble of his backside.

Or the question of whether his cock was as big as the rest of him.

It was.

The light around him caught my attention, then.

The glow of it was getting brighter as he circled me.

“Perfect,” he finally growled, as he crouched in front of me.

It took far too much effort not to look away when the intensity of his stare met my gaze.

“You are mine,” he said.

I blinked.

I was *what?*

“Fate has declared it. The claim will solidify it. I am Ivaylo, and you are mine.”

Before I could run away from him, the man grabbed me and tugged me off the dirt.

My chest collided with his, and the contact felt far better than it should’ve.

One of his hands gripped my hip more gently than I expected. The other slid into my hair, cradling the back of my head, and I shuddered at the feel of his hands on my body.

His lips met the side of my throat, and slowly trailed down my neck. I breathed rapidly, knowing logically that I should try to push him away, but not possessing a shred of willpower to do so.

My hands wrapped around his massive biceps as he sucked lightly at the base of my throat.

What was he doing?

Why was he—

A gasp escaped me as sharp pain cut through the skin where my shoulder met my neck. The pain vanished as quickly as it had appeared, but an ache remained.

“What the hell?” I breathed, my chest rising and falling too quickly to manage the yell the man deserved.

His hand slid out of my hair and gripped my chin as he leveled those strange eyes with mine. “You belong to me, and I to you. Do you understand?”

“No,” I whispered.

The pain in my neck was fading rapidly.

Serae told me to pretend to bite him, so maybe I should've seen that coming.

His eyes focused on something behind me. "You will. First, we run."

"Run?"

He released me, stepped back, and shifted forms. The motion was smooth and graceful, and the long, curling fur on his wolf form looked far softer than I expected.

He nudged my knee with his nose, and I stared at him.

He bumped it again a moment later, seeming to grow impatient.

I wasn't sure what he was trying to tell me, because there wasn't a chance in hell that I could keep up with him if I ran.

The wolf made an impatient noise and ducked his head beneath my arm. I sucked in a breath as he rocked his body smoothly, using the momentum to put me on his back.

I buried my fingers in his silky fur. Surprisingly, there was no more pain at all where he'd bitten me. When I looked down, my eyebrows shot upward. I found a jagged crescent marking that shimmered silver on my completely healed skin, instead of blood.

The shifter—Ivaylo, he had said, pronounced ee-vay-low—lifted his head to the sky and howled.

A group of wolves appeared in the trees. They moved like ghosts, and looked like them too with fur in shades of gray, black, and white.

They slowed, a few of them snarling.

Ivaylo snarled back, and the golden glow around him rippled—and spread to *me*.

Warmth swelled inside me, and I sucked in a breath at the sudden hit of...

Lust?

It had to be lust.

It was completely foreign, and entirely unappealing.

But damn, it was strong.

The snarling wolves quieted.

One seemed to bow his head toward us.

Ivaylo howled again, and then took off into the trees.

Wind rushed against my face and through my hair, blowing it out behind me as I squeezed my eyes shut. I pressed my chest to the wolf's furry back, fighting the awful mesh of panic and lust that warred within me. The lust was fading quickly, but I didn't look to see if the glow on my skin was doing the same.

Soon enough, the lust was gone entirely. Strangely, the panic I'd been feeling followed it.

After a bit, I peeked my eyes open.

The trees around us seemed to be changing more the further we ran. Though they still had gnarled black trunks and long, spindly branches, I started to see a few blood-red leaves growing on them.

My attention remained on the trees and forest as we ran. The leaves seemed to be growing thicker, though they did so slowly.

The wind in my ears and against my face grew strangely peaceful as time passed. Ivaylo showed no sign of stopping, but I wasn't necessarily eager for him to stop. The running made me feel calm, and when he stopped, we would inevitably have to talk about what he'd done, why he'd done it, and whatever else was going on in his world.

We did take a few breaks, but they were short, and we were moving again quickly after each one.

My eyelids grew harder to keep open as he continued to run. Eventually, I fell asleep on the back of the wolf who had *claimed me*.

WE WERE STILL RUNNING when I woke up. The trees above us had changed much more, and were now loaded with

large red leaves, mostly concealing the sky. My stomach rumbled loudly, and the wolf beneath me growled.

He couldn't have been growling at my rumbling stomach, could he?

That would be ridiculous, to say the least.

"Are we almost there?" I called out to him, when he didn't seem like he was slowing down.

"*No.*" The low, masculine voice in my mind made me jump and yelp. I nearly fell off his back, but luckily my grip on his fur was tight enough that I caught myself.

"You can speak into my mind?" I demanded.

"*Yes. You won't have the ability to speak into mine until you've claimed me as well.*"

"You want me to bite you too?!"

"*Yes.*"

"That's never going to happen, buddy."

He didn't respond to my words, but didn't seem bothered in the slightest.

"I'm hungry," I finally added. "Can we stop for food?"

"*Unfortunately, we don't have time to stop with my pack at our heels. I will feed you extra when we get home.*"

Home?

Geez, this wolf was determined.

I gestured in the direction I vaguely thought Serae may have dropped me. "My home is in another world."

"*Now, I am your home.*"

I scowled. "You really aren't."

I wasn't disappointed that I'd left Earth, but that didn't mean I was about to jump in bed with a damn werewolf. Even if some crazy sorceress had told me he wouldn't hurt me.

She had abducted me, after all.

“Why don’t we have time to stop? You can’t just feed me more later; humans don’t work that way. I’m not a camel.”

He ignored the camel remark, probably not knowing what that was. Serae’s magic seemed to translate his words into my language, but it couldn’t do everything. *“Many in my pack will want me dead so they can claim you themselves. It won’t be safe to stop until we reach our den.”*

“What? Why will they want to claim me?”

“There hasn’t been a compatible female in Evare for any of us in nearly four centuries.”

Shock had my lips parting. “I’m the only woman in your world?”

“Of course not. You met Serae. There are many kinds of magical beings, and there are females among most. They simply aren’t compatible mates for us.”

Oh.

I supposed that wasn’t outrageous. At least, not entirely outrageous.

“What happened to the women?”

“Serae cursed us after a fool offended her. She thought she could reverse it, but failed. Repeatedly. She’s finally discovered how to steal females from your world to make up for her actions, four centuries later. Many of my brothers have been lost to immis, the insanity of immortality, without mates to tether them.”

Damn.

There was a lot to unpack in that, but I didn’t have the mental capacity to attempt it at that moment.

My stomach rumbled again.

“How long until we reach the den?”

“Not long, female.”

“I have a name,” I grumbled.

“You haven’t given it to me.”

“You haven’t asked.”

That was a fair point. But considering he had bitten me and abducted me—after Serae abducted me first—I wasn’t sure it was valid.

“If you were a female wolf, instinct would’ve driven you to tell me. And to claim me in return, as soon as my frenzy’s magic brushed your skin. I’m uncertain what to do in our situation.”

His answer sounded honest, at least.

“So if I were a wolf, I would’ve bitten you as soon as you bit me?”

“And physically claimed me as well.”

My face flushed.

Sex.

He was talking about sex.

His glow crept over my arms, making me warmer.

“That’s ridiculous,” I said.

“It’s nature. Nature cares little for human ideals.”

“Well, I’m human. I care about my own damn ideals.” I shook my head, and the glow started to fade.

“How do your people pursue each other?”

Other than what I’d read in books and movies, I didn’t really know how to explain it or what to explain. I had never seriously dated anyone, so it wasn’t like I had experience with it.

“Slowly,” I finally said. “They become friends, and spend time together as they fall in love. Then they mesh their lives together, sort of. And then, if they choose to, they make vows to stay together permanently.”

“Veil, that’s a nightmare,” Ivaylo muttered into my mind.

I scoffed at him. “Because being hunted by a wolf and then bitten by one is romantic?”

“Not romantic. Natural.” He turned his head and brushed my shoulder with his nose, making me shiver. The barely-there glow on my skin rippled, warming me again.

“Damn you,” I grumbled.

“You fight the effects of my frenzy for now, but eventually, you will give into it.” He turned his head back. *“We’ll reach our den soon.”*

“Your den,” I corrected.

“Ours.”

I heaved a sigh, but stopped arguing.

It wasn’t doing me any good, after all.

three

EZRA

ALL THREE OF the suns in the sky had set again by the time the forest changed once more. The haunting red and black trees gave way to a lush green forest with a crimson dirt base. The new trees looked almost like Earth's, though they seemed almost supernaturally perfect with their thick brown trunks and huge green leaves. Bushes and flowers bloomed everywhere, making it smell as nice as it looked.

"We're approaching. You can relax," Ivaylo told me.

"I'll relax when you aren't holding me captive any longer."

He grumbled at me, but didn't retaliate otherwise. *"You are not my captive, female. You are my equal."*

"It's Ezra. My damn name is Ezra. Stop calling me *female*; it's insulting."

"My people would worship you if I allowed them to. There is nothing insulting about your gender in my land, Ezra." My name rolled off his tongue smoothly.

"That's not what I was saying." I closed my eyes and let out a long breath.

The scent of fresh plants and something citrusy flooded my senses, relaxing me more than it should've.

"We're here. See the large tree ahead?"

"Yes..."

"That's our den. Remember it."

I huffed. "Again with the *our* thing."

Was he really telling me he lived in a tree?

I mean, it was a big tree. Not the biggest I'd ever seen, but—

I sucked in a breath when he ducked beneath a thick opening in the tree's trunk. My fingers gripped his fur so tightly that the blood rushed out of them.

He stepped over a thick outcropping in the tree, and then jumped smoothly into a pit of some kind. It was pitch-black inside, so I couldn't see a thing.

I clung to his back as he shifted forms, my fingers digging into the thick muscles on his shoulders as he stood to his full height.

"I'm not going to let you fall," he told me, his voice still low and growly.

"Of course you aren't. You're trying to convince me to bite you," I mumbled back.

Ivaylo peeled my hands off his shoulders and hauled me into his arms. We were moving, though I still couldn't see where we were headed. The glow radiating from him wasn't bright enough to illuminate the room, and my own glow was so slight, I could barely see it at all.

"The huvim will make their way into the den in a few minutes and provide light," he said.

"What's a huvim?"

"They are small, glowing bugs. They're attracted to our magic."

"Your magic, maybe. I don't have any."

He set me down on something surprisingly soft and comfortable. I ran my hand over it, and decided it was a fuzzy blanket or something similar.

"My magic is yours through the bond, Ezra. You're on our bed; feel free to get comfortable."

"I'm filthy, starving, and exhausted. Comfort is a pipe dream." I scooted further onto the mattress, using my hands to feel for a wall. It took a minute, but I finally found it.

“I will fulfill all of your needs. Relax.” With that lovely response, I heard him walk away.

Though I itched to peel my dirt-crusting tee over my head and slip out of my shorts too, I wasn't sure how stripping would impact Ivaylo's lustiness. He was still glowing, which worried me a bit.

“What does the glowing mean?” I asked him.

“The glow is physical evidence of the frenzy.”

“I don't think you ever told me what the frenzy is, exactly.”

“I didn't,” he agreed.

And made no effort to do so.

I huffed at him. “You're *extremely* helpful.”

“Don't make me blush,” he drawled.

I bit back a snort.

He was *not* funny.

I was *not* going to laugh at him.

He added, “I'll explain more to you after your needs are met.”

“It's really not your job to meet my needs.”

“It really is, *mate*.”

Sensing I wasn't going to win that argument, I leaned against the wall with a soft sigh.

I was really, really tired.

And dirty; I was really dirty.

I still itched to take off my clothes, too.

“Serae said you can't hurt me,” I finally said.

“My magic would drive me to end my own life if I did.”

“Does forcing a woman to have sex with you count as hurting them in Evare?”

His answer was fast, and firm. “Of course.”

A breath escaped me. The smell of something cooking floated through the air, making me fight a groan. “So if I take off some of my clothes, you won’t try anything?”

Ivaylo scoffed. “I have to convince you to mate with me in the next two months, Ezra. Of course I won’t *try anything* that would make you uncomfortable.”

“You did abduct me,” I pointed out.

“Serae abducted you. I rescued you from the Broken Woods and a hoard of horny male wolves. Now, I’m making you food,” he growled. “Unlike most of the males in the forest, I didn’t force a mate run. Your scent and presence awoke me, and fate gave me no choice but to chase you.”

My eyebrows lifted. “I have no idea what any of that means outside the abduction bit, you know.”

He was silent, making no effort to explain anything.

“I’m never going to mate with you if you don’t tell me what I need to know,” I finally said.

“You’ve made it clear you have no plan to mate with me, regardless of what I do or don’t do,” he countered.

The man had a point.

I stripped my tee over my head, fighting a sigh of relief when I was free of the stiff fabric. My shorts followed. Though they were stretchy and made out of legging material, everything grew uncomfortable after twenty-four hours on the back of a wolf. I was lucky I didn’t seem to have any chafing or blisters.

I stretched my legs out on the mattress in front of me and leaned over them.

Damn, I ached.

Silence reigned as Ivaylo cooked, and I went through a few more stretches.

I was nowhere near a yogi, but I had done a few yoga videos in an attempt to reduce my stress in the past, so I went through what I remembered of them.

As I did, floating lights the size of my fist began to make their way in. I assumed they were the huvim he had mentioned.

They revealed the room to me piece by piece. Most of them seemed to gravitate toward Ivaylo and the strange kitchen he was cooking in—and he had put shorts on, thankfully. As the lights went to him, they revealed bits of the massive bed I was sitting on, along with its soft, dark green blankets.

I saw an open door that looked like it may have led to a bathroom—and another that looked like it led to the closet. Despite the fact that we were underground, and the space wasn't massive, it was cozy.

I was starting to understand why he called it a den. Honestly, the place felt a little magical.

When Ivaylo finished cooking and brought two plates to the bed, the lights followed him over.

“What makes them glow?” I asked him, my curiosity growing too strong to keep me silent.

“They feed on magic.”

I jerked away from the nearest one quickly, and his lips curved upward just slightly.

Damn, he looked good when his face softened like that.

“They're harmless. The amount of magic they require is nearly nonexistent, and regenerates far faster than they can take it. They are all over Evare, and no one has ever had a problem with them.”

“Not that you know of,” I said, still eyeing them with suspicion.

“Eat, Ezra. You'll need your strength if you intend to keep resisting the frenzy's pull.”

I scowled at him, but accepted the strange utensil he handed me. Though the food didn't look appetizing, it smelled incredible.

When the first bite touched my tongue, I couldn't suppress a groan. “Damn, that's good.”

“I’m not an entirely useless male. I know how to cook for a female,” Ivaylo said, his eyes narrowing at me.

“Don’t know how to take a compliment, huh?” I asked him, cutting another bite with the side of my utensil. “You can just say thank you.”

He didn’t say thank you. “Your compliment suggests you didn’t expect my cooking to suffice.”

“In my world, if someone feeds you something delicious, you thank them. Unless you’re paying them.” I considered it as I chewed another delicious bite of whatever the hell it was. “Even then, you still thank them if it’s possible.”

His narrowed eyes softened slightly. “Strange.”

“So in Evare, it’s expected that a man will know how to cook for his mate?”

“All magical beings have their own mating culture and rules, so I don’t know. Among shifters, yes. A male who cannot satisfy his female with food is considered undeserving.”

I frowned. “Didn’t you say you didn’t want a mate?”

“I did not.”

I gave him an exasperated look. “You said something about not wanting to go on the mate run, Ivaylo. I may not know all of your lingo yet, but I know the running had something to do with mating.”

The gold around his body swelled and rippled when I said his name.

Maybe I shouldn’t say his name again.

A few moments passed while we ate in silence before he finally explained. “A mate run must occur for a male shifter to take a mate. When there were still female wolves, nature would take over and send the male running to his fated mate when the time was right. When he fell in love without fate’s intervention, he could force his run in an attempt to force his magic to pair them.”

He continued, "I attempted to outlaw forced mate runs when I found out Serae was bringing you to us. Outlawing them would ensure that the male fate chose would mate with our first compatible female. The command nearly caused a war, so I withdrew. While the others prepared to force their run, I relaxed with those who felt the same way I did about it."

"And then fate started it for you?"

"Correct."

"But the other guys are still going to try to kill you?" I checked.

"Some."

"Why?"

He lifted a shoulder. "You are the first compatible female. You would be desired even if you were the ugliest creature we had ever seen."

I scowled at him. "You're a real asshole."

"And yet my den is the safest place for you." He took a bite of his food.

"If you don't want a mate, why not just let them fight it out and hand me over to the winner?" I asked him, gesturing toward the land above us with my utensil.

The look he shot me was dark and deadly. "You are mine, and I do not share."

At least I hadn't walked into a wolf shifter orgy, I guess. Some people would be into that, but I wasn't one of them.

"Theoretically, you could let me go. I don't have to be yours, right?"

"The bond is not permanent until you claim me as well, but you *will* claim me. I could let you go after the eclipse erases our bond if I so desired, but I will not. Fate paired us, and now, you will remain beside me through the rest of our immortal lives."

"Good way to win me over," I muttered, stabbing another bite of my food.

Apparently there was a way to remove the bond—but we weren't going to deal with it.

“Your human rules make everything more difficult. If you claim me now, I will do whatever it takes to satisfy you in every way.”

“Yes, how *difficult* of me to expect a guy to actually like me before I seal my life to his,” I shot back.

“Fate makes the decisions, Ezra.”

“Not for me, it doesn't. If you want to blindly trust your fate, go ahead. Humans make their own futures.”

He dipped his head slightly. “I will convince you to see things my way.”

“Sure you will.” I took another violent bite.

His bite was slow and measured. “You'll tell me what you like and dislike as I feed you your meals.” It wasn't a question, but a statement.

“I guess. I liked everything here.” I gestured to the almost-empty plate, and he nodded.

“Most shifters do.”

“I'm not a shifter,” I reminded him.

“Not yet.” Ivaylo stood, waiting for me to finish my food. When it was gone, he took the plate from my hands and strode back to the kitchen.

“What do the female wolf shifters do for their mates, if the males always feed them?” I called out to him as he went.

“They bring them happiness,” he said simply.

Damn.

“And what is the frenzy? You still haven't explained that one to me.”

“The frenzy is the glow of magic that urges me to mark you as mine,” he said, his voice a bit flat.

“You already bit me.”

“Claiming is much more than biting. The frenzy will not be calmed until you smell of me, everywhere. Even then, it will only relax completely when you’ve claimed me as well to seal the bond.” He turned and leaned up against the strange cabinets in his kitchen. There were enough *huvim* that I could see him and the rest of the room clearly.

“*Everywhere?*” I was suddenly understanding what exactly the glow was, and why the sorceress had mentioned *lust*.

“Everywhere.”

Geez.

“What happens if we ignore it?” I asked.

“It grows stronger.” His gaze was steady enough that I didn’t doubt he was telling me the truth.

“How much time do we have?” It sounded like I was asking when we would die, but the countdown would be for *sex*, of all things.

“I’ll last as long as I need to. You won’t be able to resist as long.”

The guy really *was* an asshole.

I glared at him. “Of course I will.”

“It’s worse for the women. Right now you dislike me, but that will change. When I’m feeding you and caring for you, the lines will blur. The frenzy will wrap itself around you and drive you with a ferocity the likes of which you cannot fathom.”

I rose to my feet. My hands were trembling a little, but I hoped he couldn’t see that.

Though I tried to come up with a good response—something to put him in his place or make him understand that he would never control me—I couldn’t think of a damn thing.

Even in that moment, my body had begun to glow slightly, and to warm a bit as well.

With a frustrated huff, I strode into the bathroom and shut the door hard behind me.

Maybe I needed to throw myself to the rest of the wolf men. It might be worth it, to see if I could get myself captured by one slightly less infuriating than Ivaylo.

four

I LEANED up against the bathroom door with a bundle of fabric clenched in my hands and the pulse of the frenzy beating in my ear.

My cock throbbed.

My body ached.

The need was far thicker and fiercer than I had the words to describe to my female, not that I dared try.

Ezra clearly wasn't attracted to me, or interested in being my female. Why fate had paired us, I was uncertain. But it *had* paired us, and I wasn't enough of a fool to argue with fate.

I *would* win her heart.

It would just take longer than expected.

I wasn't quite certain how I would handle things if she truly couldn't find herself attracted to me in the future. I supposed we would need to have a frank conversation, and I would need to be open to the possibility of letting my female go.

Veil, the thought was physically painful.

Breathing out slowly, I closed my eyes and fought to stop myself from imagining her in the shower. Though I could hear her movements, my mind conjured images far more intense than any that may have actually been occurring.

Though I itched to take myself in hand for the release I needed, it wouldn't do any good. A male shifter couldn't bring

himself pleasure while pursuing a mate. Usually, there wasn't enough waiting for that to matter.

Our situation was far from usual.

So, I waited.

Ezra's face was flushed when she finally opened the door. She was wrapped in a towel, as I expected her to be—and veil, she was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.

The color in her hair and eyes had begun changing when I bit her, thanks to my magic. Her soft orange hair had begun its transformation to a vibrant shade of red, and her eyes were still in the process of lightening to a pale, glowing pink. Female wolves were always bright colors; they were our opposites, after all.

She didn't look surprised to see me waiting so close to the door. "Do you know why my hair is changing? And my eyes? Also, do you have clothes I can borrow?"

I'd have preferred she remained naked, but couldn't say that to her yet.

"Our bond exposed you to my magic. It's likely making you into a shifter as we speak."

Horror flooded her eyes. "It's *what*?"

She had a penchant for asking that, and it was maddeningly adorable.

"My magic is changing you. Your hair and eyes are merely the first symptoms of that. It will make you far stronger, and enable you to survive much better in Evare. Wolf shifters are respected." I couldn't stop myself from catching a wet strand of her hair and slowly sliding my fingers down the length of it.

I itched to touch so much more of her, but I had to let her set the pace.

She shook her head, and I held tight to the strands of hair between my fingers. They no longer smelled like me, and I despised that.

“You brought me clothes?” she managed to say, her voice strained. “Thanks.”

“Do not thank me for taking care of you.”

“Stop being nice to me, and I’ll stop thanking you.” She plucked the clothes from my hands and disappeared back into the bathroom, shutting the door between us again.

I fought the urge to rip it off its damn hinges.

A moment later, she stepped out in my massive shirt. Her face was still flushed, and her damp hair fell over her shoulders.

If only the shirt had been a lighter color, I would have an image of her bare form to worship in my mind.

“I’m going to sleep,” she said, handing me a bundle of fabric even larger than the one I’d given her. “Your pants won’t stay up, and my old clothes are disgusting from the travel and everything. You have more things I can wear, right?”

I jerked my head in a nod.

“Perfect. Burn my old ones, then, or throw them out however you usually do. Might as well say my last goodbye to Earth.”

My cock throbbed at the realization that she was wearing my shirt—and nothing but my shirt.

I’d destroy her old clothes so damn quickly she wouldn’t have time to change her mind.

Forcing my mind back to the moment, I realized I needed to make sure Ezra knew she would be safe as long as she didn’t leave. If she knew, she wouldn’t try to run while I scrubbed the dirt off my own skin.

“The wolves waiting outside won’t dare breach your den. To do so would be to ruin any chance of persuading you to choose them. You’re safe here, but if you leave on your own, you will likely be stolen by another.”

Ezra shot me a look I couldn’t read. “I didn’t think you were going to let me leave.”

I dodged the implications of her remark. “You’re not a prisoner.”

“That really doesn’t answer the implied question, does it?”

She was too clever for her own good. “You are welcome to leave at any time, so long as I am by your side.”

She scoffed, but looked tired. “I’m not going to try to leave. Not now, at least. Maybe tomorrow. You can shower; I already know you’re going to insist on sharing this bed with me, and I don’t want you to get me dirty again.”

I dipped my head in a nod.

Though I most certainly had not been planning to insist we share a bed, I wasn’t going to admit it now that I knew it was an option.

“I can sleep in my wolf form, if it would make you more comfortable,” I said.

She looked surprised by my words. “It would, actually.”

“I’ll wash quickly, then.”

I took a step toward the bathroom, holding her bundle of clothing, but she stopped me with a hand on my arm.

The touch made my entire body throb with desire, and there could be no hiding the way my frenzy’s light pulsed around me in response to her.

“Even if I wanted to get out, I’m too short to climb up the drop you took to get in here. I definitely can’t jump out, either. So... don’t worry. I’m stuck here.” She gave me a small, half-hearted smile.

The woman was so damn stunning, every part of me ached.

The frenzy’s magic continued to pulse around me, and I nodded again before stepping into the bathroom.

Unlike Ezra, I left the door open. She needed to know that if she wanted to join me, she was welcome. Always.

I didn’t expect her to join me, but knew she was smart enough to pick up on the gesture.

With my female waiting in bed for me, I showered quickly. There was no point in trying to bring myself the release I

needed, so I didn't bother with it, and dried off thoroughly before shifting forms. Ezra wouldn't want to sleep beside a wet wolf, after all.

She was lying in my bed, facing away from me when I strode toward her. I had no problem stepping over her slight form and landing on the bed beside her. Though I would have preferred to rest up against her, I knew I wouldn't be welcome, and left space between us.

She tossed and turned a few times before peeking her eyes open. The pink in the orbs was growing more vibrant, but she had been stunning in the forest even before her eyes glowed with magic. "It's cold in here," she whispered.

I couldn't stop my resulting growl.

She was cold, and I hadn't realized.

Her voice was soft when she added, "You're warm. Do you mind if I slide closer?"

I barely managed to suppress another growl.

It was my responsibility to keep her warm. She shouldn't have needed to *ask* me to care for her.

I slid across the bed, forcing myself to remain quiet so I didn't scare her with my growling.

Ezra wrestled the blanket out from beneath me and tucked it over me so she could get closer.

"Thanks." She curled up against my side.

I growled at her again, and she gave me a small smile. "Saying thank you is polite for humans, Ivaylo. If I do something you appreciate, you can thank me too."

I scowled. "*Should I thank you for snuggling against me?*"

Her face reddened. "Sure. If you want."

I hadn't expected her reaction. She truly did want me to thank her. "*Thank you for using my shower, then. And eating the meal I cooked you.*"

Her face reddened further.

Thanking a shifter for something they were expected to do was disrespectful... but I supposed I hadn't truly expected her to eat my food or make herself comfortable in my den, though it was technically hers.

And if I was mated to a human, I would have to be willing to change.

"You're welcome." She closed her eyes and relaxed against me. "See? Not so difficult."

I made a noncommittal noise, and her lips curved upward slightly.

My gaze remained fixed on her face, studying the female who was becoming my world.

Eventually, I would have to emerge from our den and face my pack. For the moment, I was simply going to do my best to enjoy the feel of my female against my side.

I fell asleep soon after her breathing leveled out. With her fingers curling in my fur and her soft, damp red hair filling our den with her scent, I slept more soundly than I could remember ever sleeping before.

five

EZRA

THE MORNING CAME AROUND TOO QUICKLY.

I woke up to find a gorgeous werewolf's perfect, tattooed ass facing me while he cooked me breakfast.

It was a bit of a shock, but at least the view was good.

My gaze lingered on the curve of his backside and the ink that covered his skin. I tried to stay silent as I admired him.

He was really damn gorgeous.

My body was overly warm, and when I glanced down at my arms to see if the magic had anything to do with it, I found myself glowing.

Again.

It was only a slight glow, but it was definitely there.

Hopefully it would vanish after I stopped staring at Ivaylo.

Nature pulled me from the bed, and I slipped into the bathroom, wincing at the soreness in my muscles. I wanted to take a shower as an excuse to stay away from him a bit longer, but my hair had finally dried at some point during the night, and I wasn't ready to risk getting it wet again. It took forever to dry—and had taken way too long to comb out after washing it the night before.

I needed to find out if Evare had conditioner, because there certainly hadn't been any in the shower. And a gritty bar of soap had done little to make my now *bright red* hair manageable.

After I used the facilities, I found myself staring at my face while I washed my hands.

The glowing pink eyes were disorienting. Very, very disorienting. The red hair, I could get used to. It was fun, and bright. But the eyes were eerie. They still *felt* normal, so I quit staring at them.

My attention slipped to the healed bite mark on my neck. Though I hadn't paid it too much mind the night before, my hand lifted to the shimmering silver crescent that wrapped around the place my neck met my shoulder. I slowly trailed a finger over the jagged mark there.

The *claim* mark.

My gaze lingered there for a few moments, then I slipped out of the bathroom. Maybe I should've been missing Earth, or trying to find a way back there, but...

I didn't want to.

I really, really didn't want to.

Did I necessarily want to stay in Evare and be pursued by a gorgeous werewolf who thought we were fated mates?

Not particularly. Maybe it would've been a dream for some women, but not for me.

Still, the idea was more appealing than that of returning home. If I did, I'd simply be driving back to my apartment and resuming my search for a job I didn't particularly want, while trying not to let my mind linger too long on the pain of my loss.

I had known I was going to end up alone for many years. My grandpa's passing had been slow and peaceful, but my grandma's cancer hadn't taken her quickly, or painlessly. As much as I missed her, I was glad she was done suffering.

But the ache of their absence hurt constantly.

At least in Evare, I wasn't on my own.

As much as I had been disagreeing with Ivaylo, I sort of... well, enjoyed the disagreements.

That was probably a terrible thing to admit. But, it was the truth.

I made my way back to the bed and looked around the room. More of the huvim had floated in while we slept, and some had even started gravitating toward me. I still eyed them suspiciously when they came too close, but I loved the light they produced, so I couldn't exactly retaliate.

And besides, I didn't want them dead.

I just wanted them not to get quite so close to me.

At least they made it possible for me to see the entirety of the space—though my vision already seemed much clearer than it had the night before.

“Can you see in the dark?” I asked Ivaylo.

“Of course.” He glanced over his shoulder, and his eyes slowly swept over my figure. All I had on was his massive shirt, so there was plenty to see. Its bottom hem fell to the middle of my thighs, and the sleeves ended below my elbows, but the fabric was soft enough that I was pretty sure he could see the outline of my body as it draped over me.

And if not my body, at least the points of my damn nipples.

The glow around me rippled, and Ivaylo's glow swelled before he turned away.

“You don't plan on staying in this cave all day, do you?” I asked him.

“Den,” he corrected me. “*Your* den. And no, I'll have to face my pack at some point. My betas will be running damage control, but there's only so much they can do considering the situation. You will need to meet them, and I will need to fight.”

My eyes widened. “Your betas? What does that mean? And why would you need to *fight*?”

“A wolf pack is led by an alpha or alpha pair. The alpha is supported by betas. I am the alpha, and you are my mate.”

My eyes widened further. “You expect me to become a *werewolf alpha* with you?”

He shot me a frown. “What’s a werewolf?”

At least he was finally the one asking a question.

“It doesn’t matter.” I brushed hair from my eyes, itching for something to tie it back with. “You expect me to become an alpha?”

“Yes. Fate selected you.”

“Fate can be wrong though, can’t it?” I asked.

“No.”

“What do you mean, *no*? Fate can’t always be right.”

He was silent for a moment, and the smell of whatever he was cooking was so incredible, it nearly made me drool.

“Fate matches the most compatible bodies and souls,” he finally said. “I have never heard of it being wrong.”

“But you haven’t had compatible women in hundreds of years, right?” I countered.

“No.”

“So you don’t really know.”

His silence answered my question for me.

“What if when we leave the den, I see someone I’m more attracted to?” I shot back.

“Then he will die,” Ivaylo growled.

Geez.

Maybe I shouldn’t have suggested that.

He hadn’t done anything to show me how physically compatible we were... yet.

It seemed likely that if it became a question, he would do something to prove it.

And the answer would most certainly be a yes.

“Murder seems like an overreaction,” I finally said.

“It’s not. The physical desire between mates is sacred, Ezra. You glow with need for me already; do you really want me to push the magic any more than I already have?”

My cheeks warmed as my focus went to the heat in my body.
“No.”

“I didn’t think so.” Despite his words, he didn’t sound satisfied.

Not even a little.

Ivaylo refocused on his cooking.

“What if fate’s wrong, and you’ll like the next woman Serae steals from Earth more than you like me? You don’t really know women, right?”

“I have met many women. I am not *wondering* whether or not I want you. Fate declared you mine for many reasons, and my attraction to you is among them.”

My face flushed further. “It’s magical attraction though, isn’t it?”

“The magic only emphasizes what already exists, which is why you had no problem suppressing the frenzy’s effect on you yesterday. You feared me, but your fear is fading.”

He wasn’t wrong.

My fear *was* fading, and as it faded, it made space for the attraction I had felt for him since the first time I saw him. Ivaylo was beautiful; there was no way around admitting that.

I hadn’t met any other shifters in their man forms, but I had a hard time believing one could be as gorgeous as him.

The glow around me rippled again as if in response to my thoughts, and my face burned hotter. “That doesn’t mean I’m going to bite you.”

“No,” he agreed.

I waited for him to add something, but he didn’t.

“So?” I prodded.

“Your desire is merely one aspect of the complexity that is a mate bond. Desire doesn’t even require attraction. If I am to earn your bite, I must earn your trust, become your friend, and mesh my life with yours, correct?”

He was referring to our conversation about humans taking mates. It actually kind of flattered me that he remembered it.

“If you were human, yes.”

“I don’t see why my lacking humanity should make me incapable of winning your heart the way a human male would. In traditional shifter matings, love comes after the bond. You want love to come first, correct?”

“Yeah, but—”

“But nothing.” His words were firm, but not cruel. “I am not from your world, but I will adapt to your ways and earn your trust. We will teach the rest of my pack to do the same, so their mates don’t fear them.”

I was pretty sure any human woman with a little sense would fear a ginormous wolf who bit her.

“You can try with me,” I said, wrapping my arms around my middle. “Just don’t be offended if it doesn’t work. I’m really picky.”

“What does that mean?”

Damn him for asking questions.

And damn me for giving him enough information to do so.

“I didn’t really date on Earth.”

His silence told me he didn’t know what that meant.

“Dating is when humans pursue relationships. When they become friends, and mesh their lives together. I didn’t really do it. I’ve never connected my life with a man’s in any way before. I’ve had sex a few times, but I never enjoyed it,” I explained quickly, stumbling over my words a bit. “So I probably wouldn’t enjoy sex with you. You probably wouldn’t enjoy it with me either. I don’t think I’m any good at it. It

would probably be better for you if you really did just throw me to the rest of your pack.”

A moment of silence passed.

And another.

And another.

Ivaylo filled our plates, remaining silent as he walked them over to me and then returned with glasses of water as well. My face was still red, and my discomfort certainly hadn't faded, but I awkwardly began eating.

“Sex is a learned skill, and very subjective,” Ivaylo finally said, setting my plate down on my lap as he sat beside me with his own. “Most females will only enjoy themselves with a skilled male. The males you were with were clearly unskilled or untrained, and I can assure you that would not be the case with me.”

“Untrained?” I lifted my eyebrows, though my face was still burning, and then quickly took another bite of the food. Though it was completely different than what he had cooked the night before, it was still delicious.

Ivaylo said calmly, “The majority of shifters choose to wait to have sex until they can do so with their mate. We are trained in great detail to pleasure our companions, but mainly unpracticed.”

I choked on my food, coughing as I forced it down.

His eyebrows knitted in concern, and he handed me one of the water glasses. I drained it quickly, trying to regain my composure as I did.

I cleared my throat, trying to buy myself time to come up with what to say to him in response to... *everything*.

“What does this training consist of?” I finally asked him.

His gaze grew slightly curious. “Anatomy lessons and diagrams, mainly.”

Damn.

I fought the urge to fan my face. “Are the women given the same lessons? Or were they, when they existed?”

“Of course. I would think everyone would want to know how to best bring pleasure to their mate, regardless of their gender.”

“Then I was right; you’ll most likely be disappointed by my lack of training,” I managed.

“If you wanted to pleasure me, I would be more than capable of teaching you how. Male pleasure is far simpler than female, anyway.”

He wasn’t wrong about that.

I nodded, not sure what I should say in response.

“If you would like me to prove myself capable of bringing you to climax—or simply to bring you release because the frenzy won’t allow you to reach it on your own—you only have to ask. I am more than willing, at any moment.”

My face may as well have caught fire. “That’s not necessary.”

“The offer stands.” He took a bite of his food, and I couldn’t stop my attention from following the motion of his mouth and throat.

The glow around me swelled, and I squeezed my eyes shut when I felt slickness between my thighs.

If the magic alone was any sign, Ivaylo definitely wouldn’t have a problem upstaging my past sexual partners in any way.

But something told me he could do so without the help of any magic.

His chest rumbled in satisfaction as I closed my legs. “Do not be ashamed of the scent of your lust, mate. I welcome it, and it will keep the other males away.”

I would’ve preferred to die than to continue that conversation... but there was no damn way out.

“Can we just not talk about anything related to sex for five minutes?” I asked, my voice straining.

He chuckled. “Tell me how you feel about the meal.”

I relaxed slightly.

That was definitely a simpler conversation.

I pointed out the things I liked the most, and one thing I didn't love. He listened closely, not offended in the slightest by anything I said.

And as much as I didn't want to be, I was strangely comfortable talking to him.

six

EZRA

AFTER WE FINISHED EATING, Ivaylo took the dishes to the sink and told me it was time for him to face his pack.

Though I was unenthusiastic about it, I was curious enough not to protest.

“Shifters are comfortable with nudity,” he told me, glancing my way and studying my figure as he finished scrubbing the dishes. I’d considered offering to clean them, but decided it would be better to wait and figure out the dynamic between us first, so I could avoid accidentally becoming his maid. “None of us are ignorant to the female form, but I would prefer you remain clothed around my wolves.”

“I would also prefer I remain clothed among them,” I agreed, fighting a snort. I wasn’t about to walk out of his den in the nude, if that was what he was worried about. “In fact, I would prefer to be *more* clothed among them. Do you have more clothes? Maybe there are human-sized things somewhere in your world?”

“There are,” he agreed. “But the humans are fairly far away.”

I frowned. “You have humans here, but can’t mate with them?”

“No. Many types of magical beings can, but they are not compatible mates for us. I don’t know why.”

“Hmm.”

That was strange.

“We’ll visit my parents in the Peaks after things settle, and they’ll have some things to give you.”

“What are the Peaks? I thought all your women were gone.”

“The Fractured Peaks are a large mountain range in the center of the Broken Woods. Not all of our women are gone; only the unmated ones. There are still plenty of mated female wolves alive, but their mates moved them into the Peaks after Serae’s curse.”

Ah.

Okay.

“How many wolf packs are there?” I asked.

“There used to be many, but we have been dwindling since the curse. Now, there are only two. Our pack, and the one in the Peaks. Without mates, there is little purpose left to fight immis, and many have let themselves fade to the insanity. The mated couples stopped reproducing as well, to avoid bringing children into painful, lonely lives.”

Damn.

I still didn’t understand everything he was saying, but I knew immis was some kind of insanity, and that being unmated was seriously difficult for the werewolf guys.

“How many wolves are left?”

“Around fifty in my pack, and a thousand among the mated. There were tens of thousands of us, centuries ago, but between the curse and a cult that ravaged our land, our numbers have fallen.”

My eyes widened. I wasn’t sure whether my emotions bordered more on sadness or anger for their sake. It was no wonder Serae had come to my world and stolen me away; she likely hadn’t intended to make the wolf shifters *extinct*.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

He frowned. “You have done nothing wrong.”

“I know, I just... it’s something humans say to empathize. I’m sorry that life has been shitty for you, and I hope things get

better.”

“They will. Starting with you.” He stepped away from the sink. “Ready?”

“Not really,” I admitted.

His lips curved upward slightly. “You’ll be fine. None of the males will be foolish enough to touch you while you glow with our frenzy, and I haven’t lost a fight in centuries.”

“That’s not as reassuring as you seem to think,” I grumbled.

Ivaylo stepped up to me, and my breathing hitched. His arm went around my waist lightly, and when he eased me toward him, I took two small steps.

My chest brushed his, and though I was more comfortable without it, I regretted not having a bra. I hadn’t been thinking clearly when I told him to get rid of my clothes; I should’ve just washed the damn things.

“You smell of my scent and your desire for me. You will be safe, regardless of all else, Ezra. Trust me.”

I didn’t want to... but I had no choice.

So, I gave him a tiny nod.

Satisfaction filled his gaze as he stepped closer and lifted me off the floor. I gripped his biceps as he held my chest to his, clearly not entirely sure how he should hold me.

Ivaylo scaled the wall a bit awkwardly, still holding me to him as he went. My feet hit solid ground a few moments later, and I peeled my face off his skin.

Sunlight shone through the trees, relaxing my shoulders and bathing the gorgeous man against me in light.

“Ready?” he murmured.

I dipped my head in a nod.

His lips brushed my forehead, catching me off guard, before he turned me around in his arms. My back still pressed to his chest, and his forearm was firm against my abdomen.

I found myself face-to-face with dozens of men and wolves.

All of the men were massively tall, muscular, and covered completely in tattoos. Their hair was the same shades as the wolves I'd seen—gray, black, and white—and they had varying skin tones.

To top it off, they were all staring at me.

I tried not to shrink away from their attention, and Ivaylo's grip was firm enough to hold me in place.

"Fate bound me to this human, Ezra," Ivaylo told his pack, his voice strong and certain. "She is mine. You smell my scent on her skin, and see my frenzy around her body."

A few of the men and wolves dipped their heads in nods that almost resembled bows.

A few grinned.

A few just looked *pissed*.

"You didn't chase her," one of the pissed ones growled.

"He did," another spoke up. "I was with him when fate began his mate run."

"I challenge you for the right to be her mate," the angry one spat. The glare he shot our way was undoubtedly aimed at Ivaylo, but it still made me take a small step back.

Of course, that step back only put me even closer to my *mate*, who still held me securely.

"Rok. Valko." Ivaylo's low command caught my attention, but I had no idea who he was talking to.

Two men strode out of the crowd. One had pale skin and thick black curls. The other was tan, with straight, light brown hair that was shaved on the sides but falling into his eyes on the top.

I fought the urge to back away from both of them too.

"We'll protect your female," the dark-haired one said, as they stepped up on either side of me and Ivaylo.

A few growls and snarls erupted in the crowd in front of us. I assumed they had to do with the man calling me Ivaylo's

female.

“There will be more humans,” Ivaylo said, releasing my waist and stepping out from behind me. “This one is *mine*.”

He was still wearing a pair of shorts, like most of the other shifters. Some were naked, but I was trying not to notice that. Something told me the possessive wolf who’d claimed me wouldn’t be thrilled if my eyes wandered.

Without an order to begin the fight, an announcement, or anything else, the men launched into action. They shifted forms as they lunged for each other, teeth bared and powerful bodies moving with purpose. Ivaylo dodged the first snap of the other wolf’s jaws, and returned with one of his own.

My stomach churned when the alpha ripped a chunk of fur and flesh from the other wolf’s shoulder, earning a pained snarl as the wolves continued the fight.

The battle went on, and Ivaylo took only a few wounds while the other wolf bled more and more by the minute.

When Ivaylo finally pinned the other wolf down, howling his victory, I felt like I was going to vomit. No one had tried to touch me, as he had promised, but that didn’t make it any less overwhelming.

The fighting was a lot.

The bleeding was a lot.

It had finally started to set in that I was in another world... and I had no idea what to do about it.

I sure as hell didn’t belong in a pack of violent wolves who would tear into each other the moment a disagreement arose.

“Your female is swaying,” the dark-haired man beside me growled at Ivaylo.

His attention jerked to me, and he growled.

I took a quick step back, and the men at my sides moved with me.

“*You are safe*,” Ivaylo said firmly into my mind.

I wasn't safe, though.

I wasn't even sure if I was *sane* any longer. Safety had gone to hell when I went through that portal.

Another wolf charged toward Ivaylo. The alpha snarled at the shifter, but met him head-on.

"You can retreat to your den if you need to," the brown-haired shifter beside me, Valko, said in a low voice. "There isn't a wolf in the pack foolish enough to stop a female from returning to her place of security."

My den.

Right.

I glanced over my shoulder and tried to gauge the distance. It wasn't far—but assuming I made it there, it was a long drop to get inside.

A wolf's pained howl made my stomach roll again.

I'd deal with the drop when I got there.

"Thank you," I whispered.

The man dipped his head, and stepped with me as I hurried toward the den. Ivaylo was still fighting, but he clearly trusted the men he'd asked to protect me. So, I tried not to worry they were going to attack me.

I ducked under the low-hanging bit of tree blocking the entrance, and my eyes caught on a lever near the entryway. Behind it, there was a sheet of stone that looked like it might be able to slide.

Was it a lock?

It had to be a lock.

Or the closest thing Ivaylo had to one.

After a peek at the men to make sure none of them looked like they were going to try to follow me inside the den, I hurried to the lever and tugged on it. It was heavy—really damn heavy—but I threw all of my weight into it. It creaked, and then finally moved.

The heavy stone slid into place over the doorway with more loud noises. I let out a relieved breath when it stopped moving, securely blocking off the entrance.

When a moment passed without anyone banging on the makeshift door or trying to get in, my lips slowly stretched in an exhausted grin.

I was in a magical world, where I couldn't do a damn thing to protect myself... but for the moment, I had blocked off the path that could potentially lead me to anyone else.

I was safe.

I was secure.

I was *alone*.

Usually, that loneliness would've felt like a bad thing. For the moment, it felt like a necessary one.

I stepped over the sharp bit of wood separating me from the drop into the den, and stared down into it for a long moment. There were still a ton of huvim floating around, so I could see clearly.

The drop was probably only eight or nine feet. That seemed like a lot, considering I was barely five-and-a-half.

I wasn't anywhere near a professional when it came to heights or jumping down from things. But, I was fairly certain I could make it without breaking an ankle, as long as I was careful to lower myself down as far as possible before dropping the rest of the way.

"Here goes nothing." I squeezed my eyes shut as I lowered myself to the ground on my belly. One of my feet went over the ledge, followed by the other, and I let out a long breath before sliding my ass over it too.

My hands gripped the smooth stone tightly as I lowered myself down as slowly as I could manage. My fingers slipped off the ledge just before I could get my body straightened out—and I fell so fast I didn't even have time to cry out.

Luckily, my feet hit the ground a breath later. Though I wobbled severely, I managed to stay upright.

An incredulous laugh bubbled through my lips.

I had done it.

I had locked the shifters out, and managed to get myself down into the den all on my own. Sure, I would have a hell of a time getting out when I decided to—but if I wanted, I could remain locked away until the food ran out before facing Ivaylo again.

Though I didn't know how much food there was remaining, I was certain I could ration it. I'd seen a few books on a shelf too, and didn't know of any reason why Serae's translation magic wouldn't also make me capable of reading to pass the time. So, I'd be fine.

And alone.

Peacefully, blissfully alone.

The irony of thinking that didn't pass my notice—I had despised my loneliness on Earth, and yearned for another way to live.

Maybe life, or fate, was trying to show me that being alone could be a good thing.

The silence would buy me time to try coming to terms with being dragged into a fantasy world and mated to a werewolf, at least.

I LET OUT another long breath before padding back to the bed and slipping beneath the blankets. They smelled good.

Spicy, like the Broken Woods had.

That was... strange.

Why did Ivaylo smell like the Woods? He wasn't a damn tree. And he had showered. The soap in his shower hadn't had a scent, so it couldn't have been that.

Hmm.

Strange.

I brushed it off and relaxed into the mattress, staring up at the smooth ceiling above me. My mind wandered back to the day

I'd been brought to Evare.

The grocery shopping.

I had been lonely, and the day was so damn long. A stop at the grocery store was supposed to cheer me up, but it didn't. I was regretting my move across the country, wondering if I'd made an awful mistake, and remembering my grandma so much it made me ache in a deep, hollow part of my chest.

And then I'd seen the woman on the ground, and I'd gone to help her.

One minute, I had been on Earth... the next, I was in Evare, being told that I was going to be a shifter's mate.

Shit, it had been a lot to take in. It still was. There was some level of disconnect—some part of me that still felt like Evare was a bad dream. Some level of wondering if maybe Earth was the bad dream, and Evare was the miraculous answer to it.

My thoughts and emotions were so messy and tangled, I wasn't sure what to think. The one thing I was sure of, was that I didn't miss Earth. I didn't miss the silence of my apartment, or the loneliness of knowing I had nothing and no one.

At least in Evare, I was a hot commodity. Ivaylo wanted me; I wasn't alone anymore. I didn't have to be alone ever again, if I didn't want to.

I'd been independent on Earth for months, without anything to fall back on or any arms to catch me when I inevitably crashed. Now, I had a safety net.

It just happened to look like a huge, furry dog half the time, and a tattooed god the rest.

My thoughts went back to Ivaylo.

As shocking as it had been to be hunted and bitten in the Woods, there had been a layer of trust between us since the very beginning. When I looked at him, I didn't feel like he might kill me.

The same couldn't be said about the rest of the werewolves.

I hadn't instinctively trusted the curly-haired or brown-haired guys outside, even though they were likely among Ivaylo's closest companions. I hadn't stared at the crowd of shifters and felt safe, either.

The only one I felt safe around seemed to be the alpha, even after watching him fight.

That could've been a result of our bond... or our bond could've been a result of that intrinsic trust.

Frankly, I had no damn idea.

I let out a long sigh, still staring at the ceiling.

I needed more time to think, and to come to terms with everything.

Luckily, I'd bought myself a few hours when I shut the den's door.

seven

EZRA

I MOVED my thinking party to the shower after I grew tired of lying in bed. I was dried off, dressed in Ivaylo's shirt again, and French-braiding my hair when his mind finally brushed mine.

"Open the den," he commanded, his voice straining enough to tell me I shouldn't ignore him.

I hadn't come to any real conclusions while thinking, but I was wrapping my mind around the idea that Evare wasn't a dream, and the choices I made there had real consequences.

And the shifters who lived there had real feelings, too. Ivaylo may have been very, very different from me, but our connection was real to him. I had to determine whether or not it was real to me—and I had to be ready to walk away if it wasn't.

But I also had to respect that, to him, we were soulmates.

One of my braids was done, but I was only halfway through the second. My fingers were twisted awkwardly, so I hurried through the rest of it.

"Now, Ezra," Ivaylo growled.

"Just a second!" I yelled, though I was pretty sure he wouldn't be able to hear me with the thick wall of rock separating us.

I tied the bottom of my braid with a small piece of fabric I'd found alongside many others in the bathroom. They'd been near the wide-tooth comb I'd found the night before, so I

assumed Ivaylo had them from a time when his hair was longer.

If he was really immortal, he'd probably sported a number of different hairstyles. My lips curved upward at the mental image of him with a man bun.

"Ezra." His voice was low in my mind. *"I will hold you captive in our damn bed for the rest of the day if you try to keep me from you."*

I fought a snort.

His threats weren't all that threatening.

I mean, a few hours earlier, I would've been shocked or worried by the threat of spending all day wrapped in his arms. But I'd had time to accept that he thought I was his soulmate, and now I wasn't *entirely* opposed to it.

Only *somewhat* opposed to it.

I wasn't about to throw myself at him, of course.

But I wasn't nervous, either.

He had been nothing but respectful and protective since he bit me, so... I was going to go along with it. At least until I found a legitimate reason to reject him.

I eyed the distance between me and the ledge that opened up to the pit, then looked around the room to find something tall enough to climb.

"I will break into my own home if I have to. You have five minutes before I begin," Ivaylo rumbled.

"Geez, I'm coming." He couldn't hear me, but the words slipped out anyway as I hurried over to the bookshelf. I had to move fast, so I piled the books on the floor around it, leaving a path so I could drag the shelf if I had to.

I was pulling it across the floor a moment later, and damn, that thing was heavy. I huffed and puffed as I went, struggling to keep breathing.

Would it have been easier to let him break in?

Yes, definitely.

Did I want a hole in the den I was slowly warming up to?

No, I did not.

And considering it was built into a tree, he'd probably have to break the tree itself to get in. If he did that, there would be no way to repair it without just nailing more wood to it or something. It would never be quite as secure, and I liked feeling secure.

So, I battled the bookshelf.

My chest was still rising and falling quickly as I climbed the shelves. Thankfully, it was more than tall enough. I only had to climb up a few feet before I could reach the ledge, and then I hauled myself up onto the stone floor again, panting and struggling. It was smooth enough not to scratch me, though it took a lot of effort to drag my ass back up.

"One minute," Ivaylo warned.

"I'm working on it!" I yelled back, hoping he could at least hear *something* through the stone. "This den was not made for a human woman!"

A moment of silence followed, and I heaved a sigh when I realized he probably hadn't heard me.

I forced myself to my feet and back to the lever, then grabbed it, and pulled.

It didn't move.

My eyes widened, and I pulled again.

The damn thing didn't so much as budge.

I took a moment to gather my strength before yanking on the thing, throwing all of my weight into the motion.

It groaned and moved—all of an inch.

"Damn you, lever," I grumbled.

"Ezra?" Ivaylo's growl was in my ears instead of my mind that time, only slightly muffled by the stone. A glance to my side

proved that the barrier had moved just a fraction of an inch. That sliver was enough to let more noise out and in, though.

“Stop threatening me,” I warned him. “I had to climb a bookshelf to get out of the pit, and now your lever is refusing to move.”

He was silent for a beat. “It gets stuck sometimes.”

“I noticed,” I drawled.

“You’ll have to ease it toward the den as you pull it.”

“Fine. Give me a minute to catch my breath.”

He was silent, and my breathing eventually calmed as I leaned up against the wall.

After a few minutes, I grabbed the lever again. “Alright. Toward the pit?”

“Yes. And pull hard.”

“Thanks,” I muttered.

“If you can’t get it, my pack will help me move the boulder.”

“I’ve got it.” I threw my weight into the lever, pushing instead of pulling this time.

It didn’t budge.

“Try again,” Ivaylo said, his voice more relaxed than I expected.

At least he wasn’t growling at me anymore.

I tried again.

And again.

And again.

I groaned, collapsing against the wall. I was sweating and getting all panicky, over a damn *lever*. “This is never going to work.”

“Take a deep breath, Ezra,” Ivaylo said, his voice much calmer and more rational than my own.

I forced myself to breathe in, then released it slowly. “I’m still trapped.”

“I can help you if you let me.” His reminder was surprisingly gentle.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I shook my head. “It feels like accepting defeat.”

He chuckled softly. “You’re surrounded by male wolf shifters now, Ez. Sometimes, you’re going to have to accept that we’re stronger than you.”

His nickname surprised me—I had never gone by a shortened version of my name. It was short as it was. My grandpa had called me *Pez* a few times when I was a kid, but my grandma had hated the nickname, so it hadn’t been often.

“Unless I bite you,” I said.

“*Until* you bite me,” he corrected. “You won’t need as much help when you’re sharing my magic through a sealed bond, but you may still need help. Even I can’t move a boulder on my own.”

“You could pull the lever, though.”

“Probably,” he agreed. “I’ll fix it tonight, after I’ve gotten inside and fed you. You should be able to open and close it when you want privacy.”

I *was* getting hungry.

And he made a good point; I was a human living with wolf shifters. There would be some things they were better at, and some things I was better at.

Or... maybe they would be better at everything.

That would always be annoying, but I supposed I could be in a worse situation.

I could be stuck in my apartment in Savannah, staring out the window and feeling entirely alone. Instead, I had a gorgeous wolf shifter calming me down.

Life certainly wasn’t as bad as it could’ve been.

“Alright, you can get your friends to help you,” I finally agreed.

“And you’ll let me feed you?”

“Yes, you can feed me. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to say no to that.”

“Thank you.”

I blinked with surprise at his gratitude.

“Sit on the far side of the space, so I don’t worry about your safety. I’ll be back shortly with a few of my packmates,” he added.

“Alright, I’m moving now.”

He thanked me again and left for a moment. When he returned, he called out again, so I knew it was him.

Then, he and his buddies started to push the boulder. It took a few minutes for them to make it move at first, but it went quickly after that, rolling to the side. I heard a cracking noise as it rolled that made me think the lever mechanism had broken even more than before.

Ivaylo ducked into the opening, and there was no concern about the lever as he looked me over.

I sucked in a breath at the sight of him. The man was bleeding in multiple places, and had a few deep gouges in his side that looked like claw marks. “You look like shit. Are you okay?”

“I should be asking you that question,” he said.

“I’m fine.”

He crossed the space and took my face between his hands. I was frozen, having never been touched like that before. I remained still as he turned my head slowly from side-to-side, as if making sure I was truly okay.

“I just couldn’t watch the fight, I’m not a fan of violence. You’re the one who’s bleeding, so I’m the one who should be concerned.” My voice was faint as my heart beat quickly at his closeness. The glow around my body was sort of fluttering, sending heat rolling through me as it slowly grew.

“I’ll heal soon enough.” He studied me for another moment before calling out to his packmates, “Thank you.”

A few male voices replied that he was welcome, and I bit my lip to stop myself from doing something stupid.

Like... asking him to kiss me.

Or kissing him myself.

“Thank you,” I finally said.

“Don’t thank me for filling your needs.” He finally released my face and peered down into the den, at the bookshelf below it. I noticed a large bag hanging off his shoulder, and was curious about what it held. “You weren’t kidding about the shelf.”

“I’m a lot shorter than you,” I said sheepishly.

“I’ll build you a ladder.” He caught my hand and tugged me closer. After I stepped up to his side, he swept me into his arms. The hold wasn’t nearly as awkward as it had been the last time—probably because I wrapped my legs around his waist instead of just making him hold me upright.

“You’re bleeding on me,” I remarked.

“I’ll lick it clean.”

A laugh escaped me, and he slipped over the ledge and into the den. The man landed so lightly, it was ridiculous.

“I think I’ll pass on the tongue-bath.”

“I’ll give you more time to consider it.” His arm around my waist squeezed lightly, and I bit my lip again in an attempt to stop myself from grinning.

It failed.

My lip slipped out from between my teeth, and the grin defeated my attempt to control it.

Ivaylo carried me into the bathroom with him, then set me on the countertop as he kneeled down and dug through the drawers beneath the sink. He came back up with a stack of

thick tan fabric pieces that I didn't recognize, cut into squares of varying sizes.

Before using the fabric, he put away the things in his bag. Some of them went in the bathroom, but he stepped out long enough to put the rest away in the kitchen and living area.

I eyed the fabric curiously while he was gone, and when he returned, asked, "What are those?"

"Bandages." He set them on my thigh—my bare thigh—and turned the water on, dipping his fingers below it and using them to wet the area around his still-bleeding wound.

"What are you doing?"

"Bandaging myself."

I scowled at him. "I can do that." I had changed my grandparents' bandages enough times not to be nauseous when it came to wounds. Seeing someone literally torn apart was a different story, but the cuts themselves didn't scare me.

"I'd rather you hold the bandages." He dried his fingers on his shorts—which were covered in dirt, thanks to his shifting—and grabbed one of the pieces of fabric, placing it on his side and smoothing it out.

"Why?" I finally asked.

"I'd rather not scare you any more than I already have," he admitted.

I blinked.

And then blinked again.

He patched another wound. I hadn't noticed it, because it was on his back. He missed about half of it, and muttered a curse when he realized.

"I'm not afraid of you," I finally said to him.

"You ran from the fights."

"I'm not used to violence. I've seen plenty of violent movies, but it's different in real life. Way more real. I didn't like it, but that doesn't mean I'm afraid of you, or blood."

He didn't look like he believed me, and peered over his shoulder in the mirror as he tried to add another bandage beside the one that only half-covered his wound.

"Here." I snagged the fabric from his fingers, slipping off the counter and setting the pile of clean ones where I'd been sitting. "My grandma got injured really easily in the last few years before she passed. I patched her up more times than I can count, so don't worry. I know what I'm doing. Now, turn around."

He gave me a look I couldn't read, but finally turned his back to me. "You were close with your grandmother?"

"My grandparents raised me. They're both gone, now. If Serae had asked if I wanted to leave Earth rather than just taking me, I probably would've said yes," I admitted as I dampened his skin with one hand and then set the bandage against Ivaylo's back with my dry hand.

The glow around him swelled as my fingers smoothed over it, making sure the edges were flush with his skin.

"There," I said calmly, trying to ignore the way my heart pounded and my glow brightened alongside his. I definitely couldn't acknowledge the slickness between my thighs, or the heat coursing through my middle.

I patched up a few more of his wounds, and he grew increasingly tense while our frenzy's glow danced and swelled around us.

As I started patching the last one, Ivaylo said in a low voice, "We should consider what we'll do if you never grow attracted to me."

I went still. "What?"

"I want you, and you *are* mine, but I would never expect you to seal our bond if you are not physically attracted to me. The desire is inevitable, but I'm certain it feels wrong without being paired with attraction."

I blinked a few times, my forehead wrinkling.

“There are still two months until the suns’ eclipse that could potentially erase our bond if we haven’t sealed it. We have that long to determine whether or not we can establish that attraction,” he added, his voice still low. Honestly, it sounded a bit uncomfortable.

If he seriously thought I didn’t like the way he looked, I didn’t blame him for being uncomfortable.

“Why don’t you think I’m attracted to you?” I asked.

“I am not blind to your feelings, Ezra.”

“Maybe you are.” My eyes focused on his lower back, right above the ass my gaze was constantly drawn to, and I smoothed the bandage over his cut.

“I don’t understand,” he growled at me, clearly growing frustrated.

“Why don’t you think I’m attracted to you?” I repeated, remaining where I was so I wouldn’t have to meet his eyes.

“You pull away when I’m near. You don’t acknowledge the desire the frenzy creates in you. You barely look at me.”

I had a feeling that last bit was the part he really had a problem with.

Me, barely looking at him.

“You’re a lot to look at,” I said quietly. “And when I let myself, I have a hard time looking away. I *do* look at you—I just do it when you’re not paying attention.”

He was silent for a long moment.

“Most men on Earth don’t look like this. They’re not this tall, and they don’t have muscles like this.” I slowly dragged my fingers over the dips where the muscles on the backs of his shoulders connected, and he shuddered. “You’re so gorgeous, it overwhelms me. I feel like I can’t compare. I’ve never been perfectly skinny, or had an hourglass shape, and—”

Ivaylo cut me off, turning to face me. His back was to the mirror, and because I didn’t pull my hand away, it landed on

his pec. “You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen, Ezra.”

My cheeks flushed, and I let my fingers move down to his abs, tracing the thick shape of his muscles. His eyes closed, and his head tilted toward me a little. Our frenzies glowed brighter than I’d ever seen them, and the slickness between my thighs was absolutely out of control.

I wanted him, in a way I’d never wanted anyone.

“I’ve never been attracted to anyone the way I am to you,” I admitted, still tracing his muscles.

His body tensed more and more as I continued touching him. After a few minutes, he was glowing so bright the air around him looked like liquid gold. He spoke in a strained voice, “Step back.”

I didn’t want to, but I stepped back and pulled my hand away from him.

“If you don’t want my mouth on your body, walk out slowly and shut the door. Do not run from me, or you’ll trigger another mate run.”

I knew better than to mess with him in that moment, and took a few slow steps backward until I’d slipped out of the bathroom. When I was out, I quietly shut the door behind me.

The lust in my body only swelled as I leaned against the door, struggling to keep my breathing even. I wrestled the urge to go back and let him have his way with me.

It slowly faded as he showered.

When I collapsed on the bed, I was still wet between my thighs, and I ached for something I wasn’t ready to let myself have.

The alpha.

But surprisingly, the ache wasn’t just physical. It was mental, too. I didn’t just want his body; I wanted his mind.

He had listened actively when I told him about my grandma, and was interested in my life.

That simple fact made me want him more than I would have ever expected, but I still couldn't embrace the desire.

Because something told me that when I embraced it, there would be no turning back for either of us.

eight

EZRA

AFTER IVAYLO EMERGED from the bathroom, he went straight to the kitchen. Not wanting to sit on my ass and watch his body move while he cooked, I dragged the bookshelf back to its place, and started putting the books back where I'd found them.

"I can do that," he told me, not moving from the kitchen.

That was probably wise; him keeping his distance.

I wasn't sure we could be trusted to be near each other without the frenzy taking control again.

"It's fine. I like having something to do. Besides, I'm the one who made the mess."

He scowled. "Because I didn't provide you a way out of your own den."

"Lucky for you, I can be creative when the need arises." I continued putting away books.

He made a noise of frustration, but didn't try to stop me again.

Since he was still cooking when I finished, I plucked a book from the shelf and carried it back to the bed with me. I wasn't sure what it was about, but I opened it up and started reading.

It was... a mystery book.

Hmm.

I glanced up at Ivaylo's back, and found him still tense.

It was probably terrible of me to wonder, but... had he gotten himself off in the shower?

I had to think that would relax him.

And what man wouldn't, especially when dealing with a connection like ours that we weren't fulfilling? If I had my vibrator, I probably would've done the same.

I vaguely remembered him saying something about *pleasuring ourselves*, but couldn't recall what he had said exactly. I'd been flustered when he said it.

When I opened my mouth to ask him, I chickened out and closed it again, trying to focus on the book.

Honestly, I loved a good mystery. I just wasn't in the mood considering my whole life had started to feel like one.

What would the future hold?

What was going to happen tomorrow?

What would I do in the next week?

There were so many questions that nothing really felt certain.

When he brought the food over and sat down beside me with his own plate, my gaze went directly to the erection straining against his shorts.

Hot damn.

I blurted the question without giving myself time to second guess again. "Did you jerk off in the shower?"

He blinked.

Then blinked again.

And a third time.

I should've kept my mouth shut.

"You don't have to answer," I added hastily. "It's a pretty personal question.

Finally, he said, "No, I didn't."

Okay, then.

That explained the erection, I guess.

I cut into my food, my face burning.

I had made him uncomfortable. And made myself uncomfortable, too.

“Not for lack of wanting, though,” he finally added, as I chewed on a piece of whatever he had made for me.

My face continued to burn with his words. “What does that mean?”

“The frenzy prevents either of us from climaxing alone. Should either of us receive relief, it will be with the help of the other.”

Oh.

Ohhh.

Shit. That was what he had said about bringing ourselves pleasure.

“Damn,” I said, the wetness between my thighs immediately returning.

Ivaylo made a noise of agreement, and we both went back to eating. His erection didn’t go down, though, and my desire didn’t either.

We finished eating quickly, avoiding a conversation.

Needing to occupy my hands so I didn’t do something stupid—like grabbing his cock—I took his empty plate from his hands before he had time to take mine.

He wasn’t going to make me his maid. I could see that had been a ridiculous question, after interacting with him more.

Ivaylo followed me to the sink, hot on my heels. “You don’t clean in our den, Ezra.”

“If it’s ours, that implies dual responsibility,” I countered without looking back at him.

“No, it does not.” He plucked the plates from my hands as we reached the kitchen. He dropped them on the counter as I spun

to face him, dragging my body against his. My ass met the cupboards, and he towered over me.

I didn't feel a shred of fear, but the frenzy? Oh boy, it went wild.

His chest rose and fell heavily, his light eyes growing wilder.

"A male shifter takes care of his female," Ivaylo finally said.

"A female human splits the chores with her male," I shot back. Something told me it would be a bad idea to mention that in some households, the women did all the cleaning.

"You are no longer human," he growled at me. "Our bond has changed you."

"Then you're no longer a shifter, because our bond probably changed you too." I glowered at him, daring him to do something.

His chest heaved against mine for another moment—and then his hands were on my face, and his lips were hot against mine.

The movement surprised me, but I recovered quickly. My fingers buried in his hair as I parted my lips, giving him the entrance his brutal tongue demanded.

He kissed me hard and fast, his body pinning mine to the cabinets so tight it almost hurt. The bulge of his erection was against my belly, proving how much he wanted me.

Any hesitation I'd had moments earlier was gone.

I kissed him just as passionately as he kissed me, giving in to the heat flaring in my body and the need that swept through me.

Ivaylo was mine.

I was his.

On his lips, I tasted the spice I'd smelled on the mattress and in the Woods. It was his scent—it had to be his scent.

And damn, it was made for me.

One of his hands slid down my back, his demanding grip finding my ass. He lifted me higher, and I groaned as my

backside landed on the countertop, his erection pressing against my center as he kissed me, and kissed me, and kissed me.

I wanted Ivaylo.

I wanted him more than I'd ever wanted anyone.

I wanted—

He wrenched his lips from mine and snarled against them, "Damn the frenzy."

And just as fast as he had taken my mouth, he was up through the hole in our ceiling, and gone.

My chest heaved, my legs open and shaking. My lips were insanely swollen, and I traced a fingertip over the brutalized skin.

I had never realized kissing could be like that.

So instinctual.

So feral.

What if sex could be like that?

Hot damn, it was no wonder some people enjoyed it.

My body ached and trembled with the unfulfilled need in my middle, but Ivaylo was the one who left, not me. He had wanted it to stop—or thought I wanted it to stop. He hadn't bothered asking if I wanted to keep going, or telling me he'd enjoyed it.

But he had to have enjoyed it, didn't he?

My stomach clenched at the thought that he may not have. I had felt his erection clearly, but that could've been caused by the frenzy alone. And even though he said he thought I was beautiful, he had pointed out the difference between the frenzy's lust and actual attraction many times.

So, I didn't know what to think.

I'd have to ask him whether he'd enjoyed it or not when he came back.

Heaving a sigh, I forced myself down from the countertop and made myself wash the dishes before I could consider going to search for my mate.

It was insane to think of him that way, but for the time being, he *was* my mate.

I SCRUBBED THE DISHES, then retreated back to the bed to curl up with my book. There wasn't much else to do, after all. I could hear Ivaylo working on the lever's mechanism, so I assumed he was working out his tension that way.

Or avoiding me that way.

Maybe a bit of both.

It was his right to feel whatever he felt though, so I left him to his own devices.

And I was avoiding him too, so it wasn't as if he was the only one at fault.

It took some effort, but I managed to lose myself in the mystery novel. There were a few things I didn't understand, because it referenced creatures I didn't know much about.

There were fae—who seemed to be beastly, deadly warriors. There were demons, both incubi and ones that sounded like fallen angels. There were dragons in the skies and the seas, too, but they sounded more like vicious animals than anything else.

I supposed things could've been worse. I could've been dragged to Evare and thrown on the back of a beastly dragon that wanted to eat me in a very different way than Ivaylo did.

There was almost nothing about shifters written, which made me think that they probably kept to themselves. I liked that a lot. If I was going to join a community of magical beings, I'd definitely prefer to join one that knew how to stay out of other people's business.

Though the book was a murder mystery, I found myself growing more acquainted with Evare through its pages, and I appreciated that.

Eventually, I fell asleep alone in the bed, with the book on my chest.

WHEN I WOKE UP, the bed was cold beside me.

I blinked sleep from my eyes and looked around the room, finding even more *huvim* lighting it than there had been when I fell asleep.

My gaze landed on a light gray wolf curled up on the floor beside my bed—and my chest constricted.

He must not have enjoyed the kiss.

His furry head lifted as if he'd felt my attention somehow, making me think he hadn't been asleep at all.

I closed my eyes as if I hadn't noticed him, like the extremely mature adult woman I was.

He growled at me, clearly not buying the façade.

I turned onto my side so I could look at him without lifting my head. "Do you want me to apologize?"

He blinked.

"For the kiss," I clarified.

His eyes narrowed.

"Obviously you didn't enjoy it, considering you abandoned me for the rest of the day and then came back and slept on the floor." I gestured to him.

He shifted back immediately, eyes narrowing further as he sat down on the mattress near my feet. "Why would that be obvious?"

"What other reason is there?"

"You explicitly told me you didn't want me to touch you until I'd become your friend and meshed our lives," he growled

back. “I went against your wishes by kissing you.”

I sat up so I could see him better. “That was *not* kissing. It was like... mouth sex. But better.”

His seriousness faded, just slightly. “Mouth sex?”

“Yes. I’ve been kissed, and it was not like that.” I gestured toward the kitchen. “And anyway, I had plenty of chances to push you away. Obviously, I was on board with it. I was kissing you just as much as you were kissing me.”

His seriousness faded a little more. “Humans do friendship first.”

“Generally. Sometimes they start as friends who have sex casually. Or they start going on dates, to see if they’re compatible. The friendship just has to exist and develop, otherwise there’s no emotional attachment or trust.”

He looked somewhere between frustrated and confused. “You’re changing the rules, Ez.”

“There are no *rules*. Just the ones we create for ourselves. Not that we have a relationship.” I added that last bit quickly.

“We do have a relationship. We’re fated mates, and no amount of denial can change that.”

“I accepted it. Mostly. I just... I don’t even really know what it means. Or what mating means. What would we even do, if we were a mated pair? Raise babies? Live separately? I have no idea what your definition of mates is, and I can’t imagine it’s the same as my definition of marriage.”

His gaze softened. “In Evare, we believe there is a veil that separates our world from those that come before and after. Fated mates are a pair who made an agreement of some kind to remain together in the world before this one. A mate bond is a soul-deep connection that binds two beings together through this world and every one that follows.”

Ohh.

That was actually kind of romantic.

“So you believe that in the world or life before this one, you and I vowed to stay together? Or were married or something?”

“Yes.” He dipped his head. “Though I don’t know the meaning of married.”

“It’s a promise on Earth to remain together for the rest of your lives. In today’s society, a lot of people break it for a lot of different reasons.”

Understanding flooded his eyes. “A mate bond is unbreakable. It’s a vow to love each other even when it’s difficult. It’s an acknowledgement that life is ever-changing, and the couple’s relationship will be too, but they will love each other regardless of how they transform. A mated pair will do whatever it takes to fall back in love, if they ever fall out of it.”

“I like that.” My eyes stung a bit. “My grandparents had a love like that. To think of them coming to another world with the chance to remain connected... it’s beautiful.”

Could I have had that with Ivaylo, in another world or another life? There was no way to know, but damn, I liked that idea.

“My parents have it as well,” he admitted. “I haven’t visited much in recent years. It seemed a reminder of what I could never have.”

My eyes stung for him, too.

I reached a hand out and set it on top of his. He turned his palm over and slid his fingers between mine silently.

“You should ask before assuming I’m angry with you,” I told him quietly.

“And you should ask before assuming I regret something as intense as kissing you, Ez. I can assure you, there wasn’t a shred of regret for anything other than making you uncomfortable.”

“If I was uncomfortable, it was because I wanted a hell of a lot more than *mouth sex*.”

He snorted, and I flashed him a grin.

The way his face lit up when he mirrored my grin was unfairly attractive. “So did I.”

I gestured for him to come closer, and he slid across the bed until there was only a small space between our sides. It was a bit strange to me; a few hours earlier, he had seemed so otherworldly.

Hearing about his emotions made him seem more *human*. Or if not human, more relatable. I felt like I understood him a little more, at least.

Knowing he wasn't going to make the first move after everything, I leaned my head on his shoulder and asked quietly, “Do you think we loved each other?”

“I don't know.” His reply was honest, and that made me appreciate it more. “What I do know is that you smell like home to me. It was the strangest sensation to take in your scent for the first time. It flooded my senses, and I realized that despite centuries of living, I had never smelled my home before.”

My eyes stung again. “That's really intense, Ivaylo.”

“What could be more intense than a bond that exists beyond worlds?”

I didn't have an answer for him, but I didn't think he was looking for one. For the moment, it was enough just to be beside each other, sharing our thoughts.

“I feel comfortable around you,” I admitted. “I thought it was just because of your magic or something, but it wasn't like that around your pack. I think it's just *you*.”

“Your soul recognizes mine, even without the magic of a sealed bond,” he said.

“I think it does, as insane as that sounds.”

“It doesn't sound insane at all.”

A soft laugh escaped me. “You're from a magical world. A lot of things that sound insane to me are probably normal for you.”

He chuckled. "I suppose that's probably true."

A few minutes of silence passed. It wasn't like our last silences—it wasn't awkward, or uncomfortable. It was peaceful.

My insecurity crept back in. "You're attracted to me too, right? You made a big deal about lust not equaling attraction, and I know you said you think I'm beautiful, but—"

He squeezed my hand tightly. "I am more attracted to you than I ever imagined was possible, Ezra. Do not doubt that."

I nodded, trying not to show my relief. "Do you think we should hold off on the kissing until I'm more sure about everything?"

"I would sooner take the opportunity to persuade you with my mouth. I don't feel the same uncertainty you do, so the only one who can decide that is you."

My lips curved upward. "I'd rather do that too, but I think it would be smart to wait until the frenzy gives us no choice. We would have more time to build a friendship that way, too."

"That sounds fair," Ivaylo said.

I nodded, and he slid closer to me.

He released my hand and wrapped an arm lightly around my waist. "You need to sleep. Your body is likely still adjusting to the magic."

I didn't know enough about that to argue with him. "Alright."

He lowered us both to the pillows, taking a moment to press his front to my back as he inhaled the scent of my hair. His chest rumbled softly, and it warmed me.

The frenzy was already reacting again.

His lips brushed my ear. "I'll need to sleep in my wolf form if you want us safer from the lust."

"Probably a good idea," I whispered, though I would've much preferred to sleep beside him like he currently was.

He tugged the blankets over both of us before shifting forms and snuggling up with me. I ran my fingers through his fur, pressing my face to his neck as I inhaled deeply.

Maybe he smelled like home to me too.

nine

EZRA

WE STAYED in the den for the next few days, giving Ivaylo's pack time to calm down after the fights. I read more books, while he cooked for me and continued to work on the lever mechanism. He was hoping he could make it work without a few of the broken parts, but wasn't having much luck.

We got to know each other on the surface-level, trading jokes and a few stories. It was surprisingly comfortable. And the bag he'd brought in with him after the fights had been full of toiletries for me, including conditioner and the Evare version of a toothbrush, so I was perfectly content.

The frenzy's lust was annoying, but we survived. It grew increasingly difficult for me to ignore, but I didn't acknowledge that fact aloud or in my mind.

When morning came around nearly two weeks after the fights, Ivaylo told me he needed a few more supplies to try to fix the lever's mechanism. He thought it was safe for me to interact with his pack, and invited me to go with him. I wasn't sure what that would entail, but reluctantly let him carry me out of the den.

There were a handful of wolves sitting near the entrance, and I eyed them as Ivaylo set me on my feet. It was strange not to have shoes on, but I hadn't seen any shifters with them, so I'd just have to watch for rocks.

"They won't hurt you or challenge me. Most are waiting in hope that you refuse to claim me, so they have a chance to

chase you,” he told me.

Damn.

My gaze scanned the trees around us as he led me through the forest. They were so different than the parts of the Broken Woods I had seen, which made me curious. I loved the green, and all the vibrant flowers, but they seemed a bit out of place.

“Why are the trees green here, when they were red and black in the other parts of the Woods?” I asked Ivaylo as we walked.

“It was one of Serae’s attempts to break her curse. She hoped bringing in plants from other parts of the world would change the magic around us, but it failed. We assumed that if we did manage to find females, they would enjoy the colors, so we’ve been tending them since.”

I raised my eyebrows. “You guys are gardeners?”

“I suppose.” He lifted a shoulder, apparently comfortable enough in his masculinity not to dislike the idea. I was glad he wasn’t self-conscious; it would be a pain to be with someone while having to worry I’d make them feel less manly by accident.

The sun streamed through the trees, and honestly, it was beautiful. The Woods still smelled nice, but since I’d realized the spicy scent was Ivaylo rather than the forest itself, it no longer held the same appeal.

Yet, some part of me wanted to just... run.

To let loose, and sprint through the forest without a care in the world.

I wasn’t sure where that desire was coming from. I’d never been a runner, or ached for any kind of freedom. Up until I lost my grandparents, I had been satisfied regardless of what life held. That was the power of my grandma and her positives, I supposed.

My lips curved up as more of those positives rolled through my mind.

Evare was beautiful.

I felt safe with Ivaylo, and he respected the boundaries I set.

The other shifters weren't trying to kill him for the moment.

We walked toward the biggest tree I'd seen in the Broken Woods so far, and as we approached, I took in the shape of it with curiosity. It was far bigger than any house I'd ever lived in—larger than a few houses put together, even. And the bottom center of it was carved out, so the tree itself was being used as a monstrous canopy of sorts to protect a large area from the weather.

Beneath the tree canopy, I could see what looked like a huge kitchen and a few tables. There was a library area in the middle of the space, and on one side of the library, there were massive, sprawling couches and cushions. On the other, there was a large, padded space that kind of reminded me of a gym.

I assumed that space was for wrestling or fighting, given the way none of the men had flinched when the fights had begun.

Shifters were spread through the space, some cooking, some reading, and others eating. I didn't see anyone on the mats, but that could change quickly.

"This is the pack's den." Ivaylo gestured toward the area. A few of the shifters waved or nodded at me, and maybe it shouldn't have, but it made me more comfortable. "Most of us spend a lot of time here. Being around others slows the immis."

Immis.

The insanity that accompanied immortality if one wasn't mated.

Right.

I still needed to ask for more details about it, but I understood the basics.

"What do you do as the alpha?" I asked him, more curiosity blooming.

"A pack functions similarly to a family. The alphas keep an eye on everyone and do what they can to help. Right now, my betas and I are focused on trying to keep our wolves from

losing their minds to immis. We haven't lost anyone in the fifty years since we took over."

"Your betas?"

"Rok and Valko. Betas assist the alphas; we work as a team."

Ah.

Rok and Valko strode out of the forest together, both wearing pants, thankfully.

"And there they are," Ivaylo said. "Lovely."

My lips curved upward. "They don't seek you out just for fun?"

"Not that I can remember."

The men joined us just outside the pack's den. Neither of them wore an expression that made me think they had good news.

"Worren is showing signs of fading," Rok said bluntly.

Ivaylo grimaced and ran a hand through his hair. The gesture made my eyes follow his muscles a little too closely.

"He was clinging to the idea of mating with the first human. I don't think we'll be able to talk him off the ledge this time," Valko admitted. "We spent a few hours with him, and I don't think he heard a word we said. We can't get him to shift, either."

Ivaylo's grimace deepened.

"What happens if you can't talk him off the ledge?" I asked.

All three of the men looked at me. If they were surprised I had been paying attention, they needed to get the hell over it.

"His body will fade over the next few days, and vanish entirely when his soul crosses the veil," Ivaylo explained. His voice was gentler than I expected it to be.

"And that's the immis taking over, because he wants a mate?" I checked.

"We all want mates," Rok said bluntly. "Immis takes over when the drive to wait for what we want disappears, leaving us

hopeless and purposeless. The magic feeding our immortality fails without any reason to continue living.”

My eyebrows lifted. “Is Serae planning on stealing enough women from my world for all of you to have mates?”

All of the men stared at me, none of them willing to answer.

I looked at Ivaylo, trusting him to tell me the truth even if he didn’t particularly want to.

He dipped his head in a small nod. “Her magic focuses on females who wish to leave your world, and have nothing tying them to it any longer. We won’t take anyone who would regret leaving.”

I didn’t think that logic would work out exactly the way they imagined, but it wasn’t the right time to bring that up. “Then there’s an *assload* of hope. He’ll find a mate, he just has to wait for her.”

“We’ve heard that message thousands of times at this point,” Valko said. “It’s nowhere near as motivational as it used to be.”

I put a hand on my hip. I wasn’t sure why I was so determined, but I had the strangest feeling that I could help him. And for whatever reason, I *wanted* to. “Then take me to him, and I’ll tell him myself.”

All of the men stared at me.

I met Ivaylo’s hard gaze with my own.

“It could work,” Valko mused.

“No.” Ivaylo didn’t even consider it.

Maybe it was time to break out Serae’s trick and feign biting him.

“She smells strongly of you, and your frenzy is undeniable. Even in his unstable state, he wouldn’t dare touch her,” Rok said.

“No.” Ivaylo growled the word. “He longs for a female. This one is mine.”

“I’m right here.” I gestured to myself.

“And it’ll be a miracle if I don’t lock you in our den for the rest of the frenzy if you continue to suggest putting yourself in harm’s way.”

I scowled. “Rok just said he wouldn’t touch me. That’s *not* harm’s way.”

“He may not be sane enough to see that you’re mine,” Ivaylo countered.

“If he wasn’t sane enough to smell your scent on me, he’d have already tried to take me from you, right?”

Ivaylo’s hard expression didn’t budge, so I looked at Rok and Valko.

“She has a point,” Valko said.

Ivaylo snarled at him.

I needed to change gears, because obviously, arguing with the possessive beast wasn’t doing a damn thing.

“Can you give us a minute?” I asked the betas. They looked a bit confused by the question, so I clarified. “Can you step away so we have some privacy?”

They stepped away, though not a whole lot.

“I will not budge on this,” Ivaylo warned.

I didn’t respond to that, instead covering the space between us and stepping up closer to him. His eyes narrowed in suspicion at the gesture—and then narrowed further when I put my hands on his shoulders. “Can you pick me up?”

His suspicion grew, but his hands landed on my hips. My body warmed, and the frenzy’s glow rippled between us as he lifted me off my feet. My legs wrapped around his hips of their own volition.

The damn things didn’t realize that I was just trying to make him see things my way.

My hands slid up his neck and into his hair, tangling in the ridiculously soft strands.

Forcing myself to focus on what I was doing rather than the energy of the moment, I leaned in and said softly, “You’re the alpha, so it’s your job to keep everyone sane, right?”

His chest rumbled unhappily. “Not if it risks my mate’s life.”

“Would it be a risk if we were fully mated?” I brushed my lips against his neck, and his body went rigidly still.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because my scent would be through every inch of your body, and my mark would glow gold on your skin, proving the permanence of our bond.” He gritted the words out, his fingers tightening on my waist. Something told me he was fighting to keep them from sliding down to my backside.

“Your scent already covers me, doesn’t it?” I murmured against his skin, pressing my lips to the crook of his neck.

He warned me in a low voice, “Careful, Ez.”

My stomach curled at the gravel in his tone, and I nipped lightly at his neck. His erection throbbed against me. “I want to help your shifter stay alive. What do you want in exchange?”

He swore into my ear. “You aren’t willing to give what I’d require.”

“Try me.”

One of his hands lifted to my hair, tangling in the strands as he eased my head to the side, away from his throat. His lips brushed my ear, making me shiver. “I want to watch you unravel.”

Hot damn.

We were supposed to be avoiding the frenzy as much as possible.

“How?” I whispered.

“On your fingers. On mine. On my mouth. On my cock. I don’t give a damn—but if you want me to allow it, you’ll let

me watch you climax.”

“That’s not reasonable,” I managed.

“I never claimed it was.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. The frenzy was throbbing between us, urging me to kiss him or bite him or do *something* to mark him as mine the way he had marked me.

“Okay, deal.”

His chest rumbled in satisfaction.

“Tonight,” I clarified. “After I’ve talked to him, and only if you’re not growly or possessive.”

He narrowed his eyes at me.

“That’s the only way I’m agreeing to this.” I gestured between us.

“Fine.”

I bit my lip for a moment—and then leaned forward and brushed my lips to his cheek. “Thank you.”

He caught my chin in his hand and captured my mouth with his. The kiss was softer than the one the night before, and ended far too soon for my liking.

I couldn’t argue against that, considering I was the one who said I wanted to take things slow.

He set me on my feet, and it took me a moment to steady myself as the frenzy’s magic rolled around us.

Ivaylo’s hands landed on my hips as I regained stability, and my gaze caught on a handful of shifters inside the pack den.

They were staring at us.

I looked around, and found more eyes.

A few held faint amusement, but most were flooded with an emotion I hadn’t expected.

Considering Ivaylo had fought so many of them, I expected anger or hatred.

Instead, I found envy, and deep, fierce longing.

Ivaylo removed a hand from my hip and lightly nudged me in the direction of the shifter we were going to see. “*They won’t hurt you,*” he repeated to me.

Despite their sizes, their tattoos, and their glowing eyes, I knew they wouldn’t hurt me.

But I was starting to think it was simply impossible for me to comprehend just how much the werewolves wanted mates.

ten

EZRA

“YOU’LL HAVE to let go of me so we can go inside,” I told Ivaylo, as we approached Worren’s den.

Ivaylo growled at me.

“You can’t go inside a male’s den unless you’re mated to him,” Valko said with a grin. “Putting your scent in an unmated man’s space is a sure way to drive him mad. A shifter’s den is sacred.”

Oh.

“I didn’t know that.”

“We know,” Ivaylo grumbled at me.

There were a lot of other shifters around, following us through the trees. The grayscale colors of their fur would’ve ensured they blended into the Broken Woods just fine, but considering the bright colors around us, they weren’t nearly as camouflaged.

I would’ve preferred to get away from so many staring eyes, but there didn’t seem to be a way around it, so I would survive.

“I still need you to let go of me, if just so I have a little independence,” I told Ivaylo.

His grip on my hip tightened, but he didn’t say a word.

I supposed that was a no.

Fighting a sigh, I physically peeled his hand off my hip and slid my fingers between his instead. If we were going to be

connected, it would be much easier to be connected like that.

He held my hand firmly, so I assumed he was okay with the slight increase to my independence.

Or he just enjoyed the touch. I definitely didn't mind the feel of his big, warm hand enveloping mine, even if it wasn't quite the show of independence I had wanted.

We reached the large tree that marked Worren's den, and Valko strode up to it, then pounded his fist against the stone. "Come out, Worren. You have a female visitor."

Ivaylo's grip on my hand tightened. I squeezed his palm lightly to let him know I was fine, but I wasn't sure he understood what I was trying to say.

Even if he had, it probably wouldn't have relaxed him at all.

A thick, large man was out of the tree a moment later. He had raven black hair and eyes, and dark skin. Something about his features and the way he carried himself told me he was considered one of the most attractive werewolves, and suddenly, I understood Ivaylo's excessive possessiveness.

Worren studied me slowly, his gaze almost... predatory.

I wasn't a fan of that attention.

Not even a little.

"I'm not here to mate with you, so stop looking at me like that," I commanded.

The man looked taken aback by my forwardness.

I was a little taken aback by it myself, to be honest.

"What are you here for, then?" he finally asked, his voice low.

It was a silky, sexy voice, but it didn't make up for the way he'd checked me out. Or the fact that Ivaylo clearly carried at least a small amount of worry that I'd join team Worren or something.

"You want to let yourself fade rather than wait for Serae to bring the right woman from my world?"

His eyes narrowed slightly. “There may not be a right woman.”

“Luckily for you, most humans don’t believe in fate.”

His eyes narrowed further. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying you’re about to throw your life away for no reason.” I tossed a hand toward the Broken Woods, in what I thought was the direction Ivaylo had carried me in from. “The next human Serae brings across might not be fated to you. Maybe the third, the fourth, and the fifth won’t be either. But to humans, it doesn’t matter who fate binds us to. What matters is how that person makes us feel.”

Worren was silent, his forehead wrinkled and his glare absent.

It occurred to me when Ivaylo’s grip grew even tighter that to Worren and all of the shifters who had followed us, my words may have made it sound like I was open and available.

That... was not my intention.

“I am mated to Ivaylo,” I added, forcing my voice to remain calm. “And I’m glad I am. But there are more humans coming soon, and many of them won’t be willing to accept fate’s decision when it chooses their mate. I can teach you how to win a human’s heart, so you’re ready when they get here. Let yourself fade if you want, but don’t do it because your future is hopeless. It’s not,” I finished.

The determination in his gaze told me my speech had worked.

Until he took a step toward me.

Ivaylo’s chest rumbled in warning.

“Not me,” I added hastily. “I’m taken.”

Worren stepped back, but his determination didn’t fade. “When do the lessons begin?”

I opened my mouth to tell him we could start then and there, but the alpha spoke first. “Two weeks from now, in the pack’s den. All are welcome, so long as they don’t touch Ezra.”

Worren dipped his head. “I will be there.”

The agreement seemed like a victory to me, even though I wasn't sure why we needed to wait two weeks.

His gaze remained fixed on me. "Thank you."

"Of course."

Worren took a step back toward his den—and then stopped, shifted, and slipped into the trees.

"We're leaving before your inspiring speech convinces one of these bastards to ask how they can defeat the bond tying us together," Ivaylo growled into my mind, gripping my hand firmly as he started walking back toward our den.

"That part didn't come out quite right," I whispered, looking over my shoulder to find a whole heap of men still staring after me. "How long until Serae can retrieve another woman?"

"We don't know. She wasn't sure how much time it would take her to recover before she could go back. It may be a day, or it may be a year."

Damn.

I was going to need to drag my human romance lessons out a lot...

And frankly, I was nowhere near a professional when it came to human romance.

But at least I had bought Worren a few more days of purpose. Hopefully, Serae's recovery time would be on the shorter end.

IVAYLO SWEEPED me into his arms as we reached the den, and my legs went around his hips automatically. It was bizarre to me how quickly I had become comfortable around him, but I supposed it wasn't a shock.

In theory, our souls had made some kind of agreement to remain together, after all.

Ivaylo set me down on the bed and then strode to the kitchen. I wasn't hungry yet, but I knew he was going to cook lunch for me.

“Why did you tell them we’ll start in two weeks?” I asked.

“Because I need time to wrap my head around it.” His back was to me as he began pulling things from the icebox, which was a fridge, from what I’d gathered.

“I didn’t mean to suggest they should try to convince me to mate with them,” I said quickly. “I was just trying to help them understand humans.”

“I know.” He let out a long breath and didn’t say anything else.

Since I wasn’t sure what else to say either, I tucked my legs beneath the blankets and pulled my book off the bed, opening it back up to where I’d been.

I had screwed up... but he didn’t seem to want to talk about it, and I wasn’t sure how to do so without making him angry again.

WE ATE IN SILENCE, for the first time in weeks. Knowing I would insist on doing the dishes, Ivaylo headed up to work on the lever.

Were we fighting?

I wasn’t sure, but it seemed like we might be.

My uncertainty emphasized that weird itch I had to go out and *run*, but obviously, that was a bad idea.

If I ran, Ivaylo would chase me. Then, I’d come back with a furious mate while both of us continued to war against the frenzy’s magic.

It didn’t sound delightful.

So, running wasn’t an option.

I let out a long breath, did the dishes, then tucked my nose back into the book.

DINNER WENT MUCH the same as lunch, with Ivaylo cooking while I tried to read. Once again, he went back up to

work on the lever while I did the dishes.

Frustration welled up in my chest as I scrubbed them.

He wasn't sharing his thoughts with me—and I wasn't sharing mine with him.

Granted, a lot of it was my fault, if not all of it.

I was the one who had suggested to his pack that I didn't care about our bond, simply because it was fated. We needed to talk about that, but he had walked away from me.

So, my options were to either act like I didn't care and return to my book... or face my emotions and have a difficult conversation.

I groaned inwardly.

Dammit, I was going to have to deal with the discomfort.

I stayed quiet as I once again pulled all of the books off the shelf, and hauled it across the room while still trying to remain silent.

I felt stronger than I had the first time I moved the shelf. Maybe his magic was changing more than my hair.

My legs trembled a bit as I scaled the bookshelf and grabbed the ledge, hauling myself up.

That was easier than I remembered, too.

Ivaylo's attention snapped in my direction as I plopped down on the stone, and his lips twisted in a snarl. "What are you doing?"

"Talking to you." I forced myself to stay calm, even though he was clearly mad at me.

"With the bookshelf, Ez. What are you doing *with the bookshelf?*"

"I needed a way up here."

"You could've *asked.*" That was nearly snarled as well.

"You didn't want to be disturbed."

“I always want to be disturbed by you,” he growled, turning back to the mechanism he was working on again. He had taken apart a chunk of the wall the week before, and was working with gears, grease, and a few other things I didn’t recognize.

“How are you doing?” I gestured toward it.

He grunted. “Fine.”

I bit back a huff. “Would you stop avoiding me?”

“I’m avoiding my anger, Ez. Not you.”

Damn him.

I was going to have to do something more drastic.

Standing up, I stepped over the stuff on the floor and plopped down on his lap. He let out a long breath and met my gaze, but said nothing.

“What do shifters do when they’re angry?” I asked him, fairly confident I knew the answer.

He didn’t even have to consider it. “Fight.”

“Then fight with me.” I set my hands on his shoulders.

“I’m not *fighting* you, Ezra. You’re my mate. My role is to protect you.”

“Not physically; fight with me verbally. Tell me everything I did wrong. Whether you want to admit it or not, you’re mad at me. Yell if it makes you feel better, and I’ll do my best to yell back.”

I’d never been much of a yeller, but I would try if it would fix our issues.

Ivaylo scowled. “I will not *yell* at you. And I have no desire to make you feel bad by bringing up my personal opinions.”

“If you don’t talk to me, I’m leaving,” I said bluntly. “I know you well enough to know you’re afraid I’ll leave if you’re honest, and that’s a shitty way to live for both of us. Tell me the truth, or I walk.”

His hands landed on my hips, hot and firm, and a growl tore from his chest. “Of course I’m afraid you’ll walk away. There

are forty-nine males outside who would happily kill me to claim you. My mind runs through their names and faces continually, weighing the risk and calculating how many I could end before they end me. They are my pack—my family—and yet I cannot rest, knowing I have what all of them desire beyond words or reason. Even if they don't kill me, there's every chance one of them could please you more, in every damn way.”

Shit.

I hadn't realized I had so much sway over him. He was a massive man, and I was an average-sized woman with ridiculously red hair, yet I could've broken him in that moment.

But I didn't want to break him.

I wanted to... well, to be there for him.

To be his friend.

He was responsible for the entire pack. He watched out for all of them, talked them off ledges time and time again, and was probably like a brother to them on top of it.

Yet no one was there to be responsible for him, or talk him down.

Maybe I could be that person.

Despite the insane situation we had both been thrust into, he had done everything he knew to take care of me and protect me.

It was time for me to do the same, in my own way.

I lifted my hands to his face and set them on his skin. The action surprised him, and his grip on my waist tightened.

“Love is a choice to me,” I said firmly. “Always. It hasn't been long enough for me to make that choice with you, but I'm here in our den, aren't I? I haven't walked around your pack land looking for another man, and I'm not trying to find a way out. I'm sorry I didn't phrase what I was saying right, but that's what I meant. Humans want to choose love, and it might not seem like it, but I'm on my way to choosing you.”

One of his hands lifted to press mine tighter to his cheek, his eyes full of emotion I didn't yet know how to read. The frenzy's magic was rolling around us, making both of our bodies react, but we fought to ignore it. "How can I make it easier for you?"

My lips curved upward. "Spend more time with me instead of trying to find a new way to fix this damn door. Teach me how to cook your weird fruits and vegetables. Teach me how to hunt animals for meat, if you want. Tell me stories about your world. Ask for stories about mine. It's not hard to win me over, Ivaylo. I just want you to keep being my friend."

His gaze softened with humor. "Shifters do not hurt other animals. I've only fed you what we can grow."

A soft laugh escaped me. "Obviously, I didn't know that."

"I'll work on it." He turned his head to the side and pressed a kiss to my palm before setting it back on his cheek. "I'm sorry I didn't fight with you sooner."

"So am I. I should've explained myself better, and I should've climbed up here as soon as you left."

"I shouldn't have left at all."

"Technically, you're just trying to fix our door so we can have privacy. I'm pretty sure I promised to let you watch me touch myself later, so I'm surprised you're not laser-focused on this right now."

"I shouldn't have made you promise that, and I won't hold you to it. You were only trying to help my pack, and I don't want to make you uncomfortable."

"I don't want to make you uncomfortable either, and I did by talking to them," I countered. "We made a deal that required both of us to bend a little. I was fine with it, and I'm upholding my side of the bargain." I studied the mechanism in the wall. "As soon as we figure out how to fix that thing. I don't really want your whole pack listening in on us."

He grimaced. "My ideas aren't working, and Rok said they don't have what I need. We'll have to search a few abandoned dens for the parts."

I flashed him a smile and released his face, setting my hands back on his shoulders. “Looting? Sounds like fun.”

He chuckled. “The dens closest to us have been picked over, and the pieces we need are unlikely to be there. It’ll be a bit of a trip, so we’ll have to wait until morning to go.”

“Is it not safe to be out in the Woods at night?”

“It’s safe, but we’d be out late. I want to make sure you get enough rest.”

I patted him on the bicep. “Thanks for thinking about me, but I’m not that fragile. Let’s go.”

Ivaylo didn’t look convinced.

I leaned forward and brushed my lips against his for a moment, making the frenzy’s glow go haywire around us. His tongue slipped into my mouth, and he growled when I pulled away far too soon. “I promised you a show tonight. We’ll get the parts, and then I’ll make good on our deal.”

His eyes glowed brighter and clearer than they had a few moments earlier. “Alright. If you show any sign of exhaustion, I’ll drag you back here in a heartbeat.”

“Deal.”

He threw a fabric bag over his shoulder, then swept me off my feet as he stood. I tucked my head against his neck, and he slipped out of our den.

eleven

EZRA

IVAYLO SHIFTED and ran as soon as we were outside. The bag he'd carried was just the right size to nestle against his side in his wolf form, so it wasn't bouncing all over the place.

The breeze felt incredible on my skin, but the desire inside me grew worse.

Not the frenzy's increasing need; that was a beast of its own, but one I didn't think I'd be able to fight much longer.

The desire to let go and run, was getting harder to ignore.

The itch for freedom.

Not freedom from Ivaylo, or the wolves, or anything in particular. Just... freedom.

And running.

Damn, it was strong.

I gripped Ivaylo's fur and leaned closer to his back, urging him silently to pick up speed. He couldn't hear me, of course.

After a few minutes, he slowed.

We came to a stop in front of a pair of large boulders that nestled right up against each other. The trees around us were still brown and green, and there were a ton of flowers blooming nearby, so I knew it was still on the pack's land.

"This is an empty den?" I asked him, as Ivaylo shifted forms and pulled on a pair of shorts that had been left in the dirt nearby. I'd noticed that the shifters left shorts and pants all

over the place, at random. When he took my hand, I slid my fingers between his.

“Yes. The ones nearest to the pack’s den were stripped of parts and items and filled in decades ago. This one is among the last remaining on our current land. Long ago, the pack was spread over much of the Woods.”

We strode toward the boulders, and Ivaylo guided me behind him as we approached. I didn’t protest; if something was waiting inside the abandoned den, I didn’t want to be the one it lunged for.

“It’s safe. It isn’t sealed, so I would hear and smell anything inside,” he assured me, squeezing my hand lightly.

His words didn’t calm me much, but I nodded anyway.

He stepped beneath the stone outcropping, and I followed him under it. We had to walk while crouched for a minute, but soon enough, we emerged in a large, open cave.

Though there were no huvim floating around, I could see fairly well. Ivaylo’s magic was *definitely* changing me.

The room was similar to our den, though much larger. The living space was expansive, the kitchen was more open, and the bathroom seemed bigger too. There were a few pieces of furniture around, each of them covered by what looked like thick tarps to protect them from the elements.

A chunk of the wall near the entryway had been taken apart much like the one in our den, and there were many pieces lying around it.

I noticed Ivaylo’s attention lingering on me, and looked at him curiously.

“Do you prefer the larger space?” he asked.

I blinked at the question.

Though I supposed it was valid, it had caught me off guard.

“I don’t need more space,” I told him with a shrug. “I think our den is cozy. I like it the way it is.”

He looked satisfied by the answer. “Many wolves feel wild in large dens.”

Huh. “Are you one of them?”

“Yes. I feel trapped in small dens, and my fur itches in large ones. Fate wouldn’t have matched us if our comfort levels weren’t compatible, from what I know.”

“So you asked me to make sure that was still true?”

He flashed me a small grin. “Can you blame me?”

I couldn’t stop my lips from curving upward. “Guess not.”

He bent down in front of the parts, his gaze sweeping the cluster slowly. “There isn’t much here.”

While he poked through everything remaining inside the wall, I roamed around the room, peeking beneath the tarps to get a better look at things.

Though I wasn’t a wolf, I could tell what he meant about feeling wilder in the larger den. My weird desire to run was growing fiercer the longer we remained in the large space. Because it wasn’t comfortable, I yearned for the freedom of... the forest?

I didn’t know.

The feelings were still bizarre to me, and I didn’t understand why they were there at all.

So, I did my best to ignore them.

But by the time we left the den, I was relieved to go.

WE RAN for a few more minutes before stopping again. The next den was through a crack in the ground, and it was smaller than ours. It made me feel slightly claustrophobic, but I tried to remain calm as we poked around in there for a few minutes before leaving again.

TWO DENS LATER, we slipped out from inside another tree, and I shook my head a bit, trying to shake off the anxious energy in my chest that made me want to run.

I was starting to think there was more to the feeling than I wanted to admit, but I wasn't ready to ask Ivaylo about it, so I stayed quiet.

"We'll have to get the rest tomorrow," he said, his gaze scanning the silent forest around us.

"Why?" I wanted to get it over with, honestly.

"The remaining dens are much further from our current pack's land. It's a thirty minute run to the nearest one, and it isn't likely to have what we need," he explained.

"How far is it to find one that will definitely have what we need?"

"An hour or so. Two hours, if that one has been visited more recently than I can remember. We used to keep dens much further apart for privacy's sake."

"Before you needed to fight immis?" I asked.

"Yes." He dipped his head, his forehead still creased as he considered the distances.

"Are there any rules against sleeping in a den that isn't ours, if it doesn't currently belong to anyone?" I checked.

He shot me a surprised look. "Technically, no. It'll make our fur itch a bit, though."

I blinked.

He had mentioned that earlier, but I'd assumed it was a figure of speech, not an actual thing. "What's itching fur?"

"Shifters get uncomfortable in some situations. When we haven't shifted in a while, or when we don't feel safe. Sleeping in a den that isn't ours will set it off."

"How do we fix it?" After a pause, I added, "And I don't have fur, do I?"

“Not that I’m aware of, but it’s likely that you’ll develop it. Serae said you will take in the power of other types of magical beings while you’re around us. Over enough time, it’ll make you one of us even if you remain unmated. With a mate bond connecting you to me directly, the process will move much faster.”

Shit.

I bit my lip.

I didn’t want to admit what I’d been feeling, but we were trying to be more honest. So...

“There’s a chance I’m itching already,” I admitted.

Ivaylo’s eyebrows lifted.

“I wasn’t sure what the feeling was. And I could be wrong, but I feel itchy. Like I need to run.”

“That’s entirely normal for a shifter.” He took my hand and squeezed it lightly. “Do you feel capable of shifting?”

“I have no idea.”

“It feels similar to a need to stretch, or move hair out of your eyes. It’s natural.”

I shrugged helplessly. “I don’t know how I would do that.”

“If the itch gets too strong, it will force a shift. Give it time.” Ivaylo didn’t seem nearly as worried as I was. In fact, he seemed almost *excited*.

“You do not seem concerned enough about this,” I warned.

He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me in for a soft, if slightly uncertain, hug. I didn’t hug him back, still feeling ill at ease.

“You’ll enjoy being a shifter, Ez. It’s simple. There’s no complex magic to understand; just the desire for family and freedom, and the love of feeling the wind in your fur.”

The desire for family and freedom?

I supposed that wasn’t entirely different than what I’d wanted back on Earth.

“What happens if I bite you? Are you going to start trying to convince me to have babies? Or are you going to want to move to the pack in the Peaks? Or... what? What are the rules for that?”

“There are no rules for mating. When shifter couples were common, they would usually spend many years together before deciding to bring children into their dens. Because they often mated as soon as the frenzy dragged them together, they had to get to know each other and become friends while sharing a home.”

Damn.

Hot damn.

“That sounds difficult,” I admitted.

“It’s also difficult to fight the frenzy. Neither way is simple; both require effort and perseverance.”

I guessed that was a good point. “We haven’t talked about how long we’re going to be able to fight the frenzy.”

“I will fight it as long as you ask me to, without complaint.” His hand skimmed my back.

“That doesn’t mean we should continue doing it. It’s getting stronger, like you said. I’ll think about it while we run to the next den.”

Ivaylo made a noise of disagreement. “We’re still going home.”

I knew how to win that argument, though. “If we go to the other den, we’ll be able to close it, and I can keep my side of our deal, remember?”

He was silent for a moment.

A long, long moment.

My lips curved upward against his chest as I waited. I slowly wrapped my arms around his waist, returning his hug.

“Alright, we’ll stay the night there,” Ivaylo finally agreed, his voice gruff. “But if the itch grows too strong, you tell me, and we’ll run home regardless of the hour.”

“Deal.” I hugged him a bit tighter, and his grip grew firmer as well. We both lingered there for a long moment before he reluctantly released me.

“We need to get moving.”

I bit my lip to hide a grin and nodded.

Though I had been reluctant to agree to the terms of his deal at first, I was getting pretty damn excited about it.

The frenzy’s constant rippling around me certainly didn’t hurt that, but I was pretty sure I’d be excited even without the lusty magic.

twelve

EZRA

OUR JOURNEY to the cave didn't settle my itch very much. I wasn't ready to think of it as my *fur* itching, but I couldn't come up with a more perfect way to label it than an itch.

My mind wandered back to my grandparents as we ran, the way it often seemed to.

I still loved them so much it hurt. I couldn't help but consider what they would say if I could sit down and tell them about everything that had happened over the past few weeks.

They would be stunned, of course. Anyone would be.

But... I had the feeling they would also be intrigued.

My grandma would find it exciting, and my grandpa would be fascinated by my descriptions of Evare. The three suns and two moons would blow their minds—and the wolves' story would have them on the edge of their seat.

Grandpa would've warned me to take it slow with Ivaylo and make sure I could handle the cultural differences.

Grandma would claim she had something in her eye when she teared up at hearing how much he had ached for a mate. She would tell me to be just as careful with his heart as I was with my own, too.

We would talk and laugh for hours. By the time I walked away, I would feel better about everything, including my bond with Ivaylo.

I would've given *anything* to have that conversation, but some things were impossible, even for magical beings.

My mind continued to linger on them as I watched the Woods transform around us. The colorful flowers and green leaves vanished, replaced by the black trees and red leaves that were natural to the land. They had been slightly terrifying the last time I saw them, but I was starting to see the beauty in their stark simplicity.

I wiped tears off my cheeks as I remembered the letter my grandma had written to me before she passed. The envelope had been a part of her will, and I'd memorized every damn word in the days after I lost her. She was the whole reason I'd moved to Georgia.

Dearest Ezra,

There are so many things I want to say, but having watched you grow, I simply have no need to write most of them down.

You are strong.

You are independent.

You are fearless.

I have loved you more than life itself, and will continue to do so long after I am gone.

Please don't shut your heart to new experiences. See the world. Move to a new country. Forget being responsible for a while, and just live.

Breathe fresh air every chance you get.

Feel sand beneath your toes, often.

Visit places with names I can't pronounce, and smile at sunrises more beautiful than I can ever imagine.

Even more than all of those things, love yourself, and leave yourself open to love however and whenever it finds you.

Love,

Grandma

I'd mustered every ounce of courage I possessed to move to Savannah, because she had always wanted to visit.

I'd gone to the beach, and I'd watched the sun rise and set over the ocean a dozen times.

I hadn't felt strong, or fearless, or even very independent, despite my best efforts.

But now I was in an entirely new world. There was no sand beneath my toes, but there was a hell of a lot of red dirt.

I'd watched in wonder as three suns had risen and set over bloodred leaves in the Broken Woods, and I'd buried my fingers in the silken fur of a wolf shifter who didn't want just my heart or body, but my soul as well.

I was doing everything she wanted, in a way neither of us could've ever anticipated—and I was *hopeful*, for the first time since I'd lost her.

“*What’s wrong?*” Ivaylo’s growl in my mind made my lips curve upward just slightly.

“Nothing’s wrong. I’m just thinking about my grandparents,” I said aloud.

“*What can I do to help?*” The growl was gone from his voice, but he still sounded worried.

I scratched his fur a little. “Just keep running.”

He grumbled, but picked up the pace.

I closed my eyes as the wind tugged at my braids, pulling strands of hair free and making my heart beat faster.

Though I still missed my grandparents, I knew they would’ve wanted me to enjoy myself.

They wanted me to live my life with hope, heart, and passion... and that was what I was going to do.

Even if I was doing it in a world none of us had ever realized existed.

There was no question; I was still hopelessly undereducated about my role in shifter society, and fairly uncertain about how many of them I could actually fill. The question of whether I wanted to fill them was a heavy one, too.

Everything going on was unnatural for everyone involved, but that didn’t mean it couldn’t work. It *did* mean that I needed to readjust my expectations, and open my mind like my grandma had said.

And learn as much as I possibly could.

I forced myself to think back on what I’d learned from Ivaylo.

It seemed like male shifters lived *for* their mates. He expected to cook for me, and clean for me too. To take care of everything while I just sat around and read books. It even bothered him when I did the dishes.

There had to be more to it than that, didn’t there? It seemed like all the male wolves wanted from the female was companionship and sex, forever.

If that was really his perspective... I hadn't done a damn thing he wanted.

I grimaced at the thought.

Ivaylo was adapting for me. He was trying to change his expectations, and trying to allow me to do what I wanted even if it went against his instincts. He was kind even when I dragged the bookshelf around, instead of asking him for the help he wanted to give.

But how had I adapted for him?

I had come to his world, but not willingly.

The only thing I had really done "for him" was eat his food and agree to let him watch me climax. And the watching thing had been part of a bargain that required him stretching even further from his comfort zone.

We needed to have a real, deep discussion without getting angry at each other. Without the frenzy getting in the way too, if possible.

And I needed to start adapting somehow.

Wolf shifters didn't date. They didn't consider all of the possibilities and make a choice. They let fate or nature decide for them, then did whatever it took to fall in love.

I had heard that arranged marriages worked really well in other countries. I could've been misremembering that, but what if it was true? What if building a relationship by choice and requirement made for a stronger bond than the hormones of love?

It wasn't as if the high divorce rate made me think that love was all-powerful.

He hadn't hurt me. He hadn't been cruel to me, or manipulative. He would be a good husband, or mate. He would put me first, as he had proven, and he wouldn't even expect me to do the same.

But I needed to be better to him than he seemed to desire.

Starting immediately.

And with the intimacy thing that night.

MY HEART WAS STILL BEATING RAPIDLY when we reached the den Ivaylo had been referring to. He studied me beside the boulders for a moment before determining that I was as okay as I claimed. Then, he pulled me in for a short, gentle hug before releasing me.

We had to climb over a few large rocks to get inside. Though he could've just lifted me, he saw that I wanted to scale them, and simply remained close in case I needed him.

I was grinning when we finally made it into the den. It was the perfect size—about the same as mine and Ivaylo's.

“There are a few fruit trees right outside. Make yourself comfortable; I'll be back with food in a few minutes,” Ivaylo said, as I started wandering around like I had at the other dens we'd visited. Though I still felt a bit of an itch, it wasn't too strong to ignore.

I was curious about the fruit Ivaylo had seen, since I hadn't noticed any myself. Deciding I'd ask him to show me when we left, I started pulling the tarp-like sheets off the furniture while I waited for him.

Ivaylo returned soon enough, and I was folding the final tarp when he did. “I could've done that,” he rumbled, grabbing the remaining tarp from my hands. The bag of fruit and door parts hung off his shoulder, filled to the brim with the former. We really hadn't collected many parts.

Dammit.

I was already failing at the whole letting-him-provide thing again.

“Sorry. Next time, it's all yours.”

He set the folded tarp on the others and pulled our bag off his shoulder, then tugged out a few pieces of fruit. They were all around half the size of my fist, with fuzzy black skin that didn't look incredibly appetizing.

Ivaylo noticed my lack of enthusiasm, and reassured me. “You’ll like the taste.”

I wasn’t convinced, but nodded anyway.

There was a table with two chairs in the den, so we both sat down at it. I took a reluctant bite, and my eyes widened when I realized he was right. The berries were delicious.

My thoughts wandered again as we ate. It seemed sad to me that we were staying in the den of a male shifter who had faded away without a mate, and there were *two* chairs inside it.

How many nights had he spent sitting down, staring at the empty seat across from him?

How many times had he yearned for a mate to love?

My heart broke for the man I’d never meet. I hoped that the shifters were right—that there was a veil they crossed at their death. I hoped there was another world after Evare, where they’d have a chance to find more happiness.

“Why doesn’t our den have a table?” I asked Ivaylo, wondering if the reasoning had occurred to him as well.

He lifted a shoulder. “I realized eating alone at a table for two was a trigger for immis, and made everyone burn them.”

Damn.

I hadn’t wanted to be right about that, but it was probably better they had gotten rid of them.

He asked about my grandparents while we continued eating, and I wore a sad smile as I told him about them. Though I missed them desperately, the intimacy of telling him stories I’d never shared with anyone else didn’t go unnoticed.

The glows of our frenzy seemed to dance off one another as the night went on, swelling and moving with every brush of our legs, hands, or knees.

As the magic played, it warmed my body and reminded me of my promise.

It was late, and I was wet between my thighs... and I was excited that I was finally going to do something about that.

Our conversation faded as my gaze lingered on the magic around us. Ivaylo's knee brushed mine, and I found his smoldering gray eyes moving slowly over my face, as if he couldn't help but take me in.

My thoughts slipped back to our conversation about his worry that I would walk away. I hoped tonight would clear that up—for both of us.

I said softly, "I would be attracted to you even without the bond."

"And I, you."

"I'm serious, Ivaylo. *Vay*." He always called me Ez, so I figured that justified me in shortening his name. "I thought you were the most beautiful man I had ever seen the first moment I saw you. The biting scared the shit out of me—but I was still attracted to you from the beginning. The frenzy wouldn't have wrapped around me at all if I wasn't, right? You said it depends on my desire, and even that night, I was glowing."

"I suppose you were."

"Don't *suppose*. Know." I sat down on his lap the way I had earlier. "Can I touch you?"

His chest rumbled. "Always. You never need to ask."

I liked that.

I liked it a lot.

Setting my hands on his shoulders, I slowly ran them over his thick arms. "I've only ever seen muscles like this in pictures," I told him, moving my hands to his chest. "They feel so much better than I would've imagined."

His eyes closed, his head tipping back as he enjoyed my touch. The frenzy's glow around him was as bright as I'd ever seen it, and his erection throbbed beneath my core, but I just continued touching him. The only fabric separating us was the thin material of his shorts, but that only made the moment more thrilling.

My fingers made it down to the chiseled lines of his abdomen, and he growled, his hips arching slightly to press his cock against me. I noticed his hands gripping the sides of his seat, as if to hold them back.

“You can touch me too, if you want,” I murmured, still tracing the lines on his abdomen.

His hands were on my thighs in a heartbeat, his large, rough grip moving up the bare flesh and finding my ass. I sucked in a breath as he took thick handfuls of my backside and squeezed, using his grip to rock me against his cock. My fingers paused on his abs as rough pleasure flooded me, my wetness soaking his shorts.

“How are you going to climax for me?” Ivaylo’s voice was low.

“I haven’t decided. Give me a few options,” I breathed.

He rocked me against his erection again, and I bit my cheek to stop myself from crying out.

Holy hell, I had never imagined *that* could feel good.

“We could stay like this. I could make you unravel on my cock, with my shorts separating us.”

Hot damn.

My chest rose and fell quickly. “Or?”

“I could set you on this table and pleasure you with my mouth.”

Ohhh.

“Or?” My voice strained.

“I could take you to the bed and make love to you with my fingers.

Crap.

He rocked me against his erection again, and I bit my cheek so hard I tasted blood.

“Or?” I managed.

“You could ride my cock here and now.”

Shit.

Holy shit.

“I don’t think I can choo—ohh damn.” He rocked me against his erection again, and my hands flew back to his shoulders, gripping tightly. The frenzy glowed brightly around us, sending need pulsing through every damn inch of me. “All of them. I want all of them.”

My ass hit the tabletop a moment later. I sucked in a breath as one of Ivaylo’s hands slid over my belly and the other caught my knee, pushing my back to the table and opening my thighs.

I landed on a few of those damn berries, but I didn’t feel them beneath my shirt. Because in that same moment, his mouth found my core.

I cried out as his tongue dragged over my clit, my hips nearly arching off the table. The glow between us was unreal—and the feel of his tongue was even more insane.

Moments later, I was shattering, crying out as my body rocked against his face. The pleasure was like nothing I had ever felt before, and went on for so damn long, the world spun over my head as I came down from the high.

“Holy shit,” I moaned, trying to catch my breath.

“You taste incredible,” Ivaylo growled against my core, not so much as considering pulling away.

I couldn’t have wanted more... could I?

Dammit, I did.

I really, really did.

His tongue moved over me slowly.

“You don’t have to keep going,” I told him weakly, my breathing already picking up again.

He snarled against me, lifting my hands to his hair and burying my fingers in the strands. I gripped tightly as he slowly dragged me back to the ledge, stroke by stroke, moment by moment.

The sounds I made were foreign to me. The way my body moved was, too.

But damn, I hoped it would never end.

I climaxed again, but he didn't pull away.

I sure as hell didn't *push* him away.

If one of us stopped, it definitely wasn't going to be me.

My legs wrapped around the back of his head as he dragged me to the ledge again, and again, and again.

Every time, I thought the pleasure or desire would fade.

But every time, it burned hotter.

Our frenzy made the entire room glow gold, but it wasn't enough.

I needed more.

"I want all of you," I breathed. "Now." When I tugged on his hair, he rose to his feet, towering over me.

He was still the most gorgeous man I had ever seen.

My gaze followed his hands down as he stepped out of his shorts.

He was perfect.

Absolutely, insanely perfect.

"Tell me you're sure," he growled, tugging my shirt over my head and tossing the fabric to the ground so I was entirely bare before him.

"I'm positive."

His chest rumbled as he lined his tip up with my slit, then lifted my legs, tugging me closer before thrusting lightly.

My thoughts died as the tip of his cock slid inside me.

My breathing followed.

He was huge.

So, so huge.

A desperate moan escaped me as he thrust again, working himself deeper inside me.

“Breathe, Ezra,” he snarled.

I forced myself to suck in a breath—and cried out a heartbeat later when he slid the rest of the way in.

A soft whimper escaped me. “Fuck.”

I was so full.

So, so full.

If there was still a place where I ended and Ivaylo began, I didn’t stand a chance of finding it.

“Tell me how you feel,” he commanded me.

“Good. So, so good.”

The sound of his satisfaction filled the air.

I hadn’t known sex could feel like that.

Intense, and intimate, and... otherworldly.

And I never wanted it to end.

His thumb brushed my clit while he stretched me so insanely far—and I lost it.

Screams filled the air as I unraveled uncontrollably, shattering and shattering and shattering.

The pleasure was crazy.

Absolutely, unbelievably insane.

And I hoped I would never become sane again.

My teeth elongated in my mouth as Ivaylo roared with his climax, flooding my channel with his release.

He pulled me into his arms, holding me tight. My lips brushed his throat, and the desire overpowered me.

He was going to be mine.

I was going to make him mine.

My teeth scraped his skin.

Just before I could bite down, he tugged me away from his neck and shot me a dark, hot look. “What are you doing?”

“I need you,” I nearly whimpered, the desire so strong I could barely fight it.

“You have me,” he growled. “But not like that. Not until you’re sure, and not while the frenzy is driving you.”

Ivaylo’s hands were hot on my thighs as he pulled me off his cock, and I cried out at the loss of him.

The need was still too intense.

He flipped me over smoothly, and my palms met the fruit-smearred table.

I barely noticed the fruit as he spread my thighs and slammed into me again, making me cry out in pleasure. One of his hands slid up to my breasts, gripping roughly. The other held my thigh, positioning me perfectly.

“Talk to me, Ez. Tell me what you want.”

“Everything you’re doing,” I moaned, moving my hips as his hand slid further up my thigh and found my clit.

Damn, he was good at that.

So, so good at that.

It was all too much. Way, way too much.

I shattered again, our cries of ecstasy flooding the air as pleasure overwhelmed us both.

I couldn’t have told you the time, day, or hell, even which world I was in...

But I had never felt more alive.

thirteen

EZRA

IVAYLO CARRIED me to the bed as both of us caught our breath. My face was tucked against his neck, his chin resting on top of my head, and it felt heavenly. Some part of me itched to lean in and bite him, but it was easily ignored. “You’re covered in fruit,” he rumbled, his voice amused.

“Some guy pushed me down on a table of berries,” I mumbled against him.

He chuckled. “He sounds like an ass.”

“He is.” My lips curved upward. “At least he’s pretty.”

Ivaylo laughed, the sound loud and genuine. My smile widened, and I didn’t bite my lip to hide it.

He set me down on the bed. “I suppose I need one redeeming quality.”

“Mmhm.”

I’d never had sex like that before—but I’d also never joked around with someone afterward while they held me and made me laugh.

Ivaylo stepped away for a moment, and then returned with a wet cloth. Though I reached for the cloth, he simply kneeled on the bed beside me and slowly began cleaning my back.

“Thank you, Ezra,” Ivaylo said, his voice soft and sincere. He was still naked, and definitely still hard, but the frenzy’s glow had vanished entirely. We seemed to have satisfied it for the moment, and I felt calmer and more focused than I had since being brought to Evare.

“I thought we weren’t supposed to thank each other for things like that,” I said, shooting him a small smile over my shoulder.

His lips curved slightly too. “In my world, no. But you are not from my world.”

My soft smile remained as he continued cleaning my back.

It was strange to be respected so much. To be so cared for, too.

“Am I allowed to thank you too?” I teased him.

“Of course not.”

I laughed.

His lips brushed my shoulder before he left for a moment to rinse the rag, then returned and moved to my front. His hands were gentle on my breasts, shoulders, and abdomen as he cleaned me, and we were both quiet.

A moment later, he stepped away from the bed again.

When he came back, he had a fresh cloth. I wasn’t sure what it was for, until he tugged me to the ledge of the bed with his free hand and then kneeled between my thighs.

My mouth dried when he used his cloth to carefully clean the insides of my legs, and then lightly dragged it over every fold I possessed.

“You don’t have to do that,” I whispered, my words coming out slightly strangled.

His gaze lifted to mine, steady and serious. “There is nothing I would rather be doing than taking care of you right now. You gave me a great gift tonight.”

I couldn’t get any more words out as he finished cleaning me, then strode back to the bathroom with his cloth.

He returned a moment later and slipped into bed beside me. My face met his chest, and he wrapped his arms around me, pulling me down with him until the front of my body was all but glued to his.

“Why do you think the sex was a gift?” I asked. “You’re the one who put forth all the effort—and you got me off way more

than I did you.”

He was silent for a moment, and one of his hands started moving slowly over the backs of my thighs. We were both still bare, and his touch warmed me in a way the frenzy usually did.

“I had nothing to live for before you were brought here,” he finally said. “I struggled with immis alongside the rest of my pack. Though I buried myself in keeping them alive, and kept myself sane that way as well, there was little hope. I never truly thought I would hold a female in my arms, smell the scent on her skin, or taste her pleasure on my tongue. I certainly never let myself hope I would feel her body wrapped around mine as she climaxed. Tonight was a gift, because I never expected to experience it. Even if you choose another male, I will cherish the memories for the rest of my life.”

My throat constricted. “You can’t talk about me choosing another guy while we’re cuddling naked, Vay. I’m clearly yours right now.”

“Now is not enough for me,” he said bluntly.

It wasn’t enough for me either.

I already wanted more with him—I wanted him to touch me again, to taste me again, to *fill* me again.

The frenzy was gone, but my desire for him hadn’t faded at all. I was exhausted, but I still wanted more.

“Will the frenzy come back?” I asked him, opening my eyes again after a few moments had passed.

“It will return in a few hours, at most. It won’t disappear entirely until you bite me.”

Damn.

“You should’ve let me bite you, then. I feel calmer now than I have since Serae dragged me through that portal.”

He chuckled softly. “Not while I know you could regret it.”

My lips curved upward. “I’m not much for regretting. My grandma always made me look for the positives in every

situation, and now my brain seems to do that whether I want it to or not.”

“The positives?”

“The good things. Like... we’re still stuck in the frenzy, but at least we have a few hours without it. I’ve been torn away from the world I know, but I ended up in the arms of a gorgeous werewolf who’s ridiculously good at sex, which is a positive.”

He laughed. “My female isn’t ready to choose me, but she’s bare in my arms, coated in my scent.”

“Don’t forget the fruit that was all over me. I was basically a dessert for you,” I pointed out.

His responding wide grin made me feel happier than I ever would’ve expected. “That’s certainly a positive.”

“Exactly. I don’t think I would regret it if I bit you. It would be a big change, but all of this has been a big change.”

“I still won’t allow it until you’re certain.”

“We’ll have to agree to disagree, then,” I said, my lips stretching wide in a yawn.

“We will.” His lips brushed my shoulder. “Go to sleep, Ez. I want you well-rested for the run back in the morning.”

He still wanted to take care of me, and I needed to let him when it made sense. So, I nodded and closed my eyes.

Despite the warmth in my body, I was relaxed enough that I fell asleep quickly.

I WOKE up alone in bed, but when I sat up, I found Ivaylo working on the wall.

“Couldn’t sleep?” I mumbled to him, brushing a few loose strands of hair from my eyes.

“My fur started to itch partway through the night, so I figured I may as well get to work.” He looked over his shoulder at me for a long moment, his gaze slowly moving over my bare form. “Veil, you’re gorgeous.”

My lips curved upward. “Thanks.”

“I’ll be done soon, then we’ll head back to our den. There are more berries, if you’re hungry now.”

My eyes moved to the table, which looked like it had been cleaned. “How long have you been awake?”

“A few hours.”

I frowned. “You could’ve woken me up to help if you were that uncomfortable.”

“You needed to rest.” He turned back to the wall and focused on it.

I reminded myself that one of the main issues we were having was because of our different cultures.

He *wanted* to take care of me. It made him feel good.

So, I needed to get used to letting him do it.

“Thanks for letting me sleep.” I slipped out of bed and padded over to the fruit he’d picked for me.

His chest rumbled a bit. “It was my pleasure.”

I sat down at the table, which had definitely been cleaned. “Hopefully not as much pleasure as last night.”

He flashed me a wicked grin that made my heart stumble, as stupid as that sounded. “Not even close.”

I popped a berry into my mouth, fighting a grin of my own. “We haven’t talked about whether or not there will be a repeat of that.”

“I think you know where my opinions stand.” He turned back to the wall, focused on taking pieces apart. “It’s entirely your decision, and I will go along with whatever you decide.”

I made a noise of disagreement. “It affects us both. Ignoring the frenzy isn’t any fun for either of us, and we’re already glowing again. I want to hear what you think and feel.” The glow was so soft it was nearly nonexistent, but there was no denying it. I was pretty sure it would swell and brighten over time like it had before.

Ivaylo let out a long breath. “I think fighting the frenzy is worth the discomfort if it makes you more comfortable. If I were the only factor, you’d be spread wide on that bed right now, screaming in pleasure. I’m not, so I’m over here.”

My face flushed. “I’m not sure what I think. On one hand, I obviously want you. On the other, it would be smarter to resist so we don’t get lost in the lust before we get to know each other more.”

He made a noise of agreement.

A thought crossed my mind, and I froze. “Shit. How do werewolf couples get pregnant? Is it the normal way?”

“Is the normal way sex?” he asked me.

“Yes.”

“Then yes.”

“Shit.” I hissed the word, squeezing my eyes shut.

His gaze was curious. “Both shifters in a sealed mate bond must will it to happen while they make love, and both will feel a heavy tug on their magic when they do. If you were pregnant, you would know instantly.”

Oh.

Huh.

“Well, I guess that’s a relief.” I leaned back against my chair and ate another berry, though my heart was still beating a little fast. “Maybe we need some kind of sex rules. Like... we can have sex once every other day or something.”

He snorted. “That sounds ridiculous.”

“It kind of does,” I admitted, a reluctant grin spreading over my face.

“The easiest solution would be to hold off until the frenzy grows too annoying, sate the magic, then hold off again until the process repeats.”

“That sounds a little ridiculous too,” I teased.

He chuckled. “It does. The alternative is you fighting the urge to climb my cock while surrounded by my pack, as we experienced near the pack’s den.”

Right.

“Okay, we’ll go with your plan,” I agreed. “We wait until the frenzy gets out of hand, then we do it again.” The plan sounded a bit passionless, but it seemed wise to follow logic rather than passion considering the circumstances.

I continued working on my berries while Ivaylo took the wall apart. He finished getting what he needed for our den before I was done, and then we both put our clothes on—which he had also cleaned—and we headed out.

fourteen

WE MADE it back to our den just after the middle of the day. Ezra's fur was still itching badly, and I hated that I couldn't relieve it for her.

She stepped into the shower in hopes it would calm the itch, and I began repairing the closing mechanism to stop myself from joining her.

My ears were closely attuned to the sounds she made, though my hands were occupied enough to keep me planted on my knees on the floor.

Ezra was silent through her shower. Eventually, she shut off the water and came padding out into the living area. She was quiet as she found a clean shirt, pulled it on, and then called out, "Do you have paper and a pen somewhere?"

"In the closet," I called back.

She walked back in, and after moving some things around, came out again. "Want me to climb up the bookshelf, or would you rather carry me up?"

"I'm coming." I set my tools down and dropped smoothly into the room. Damp red strands fell over her chest and down her back in soft waves, wetting the fabric of her shirt so it clung to her breasts and outlined the points of her nipples.

I'd never get tired of looking at her.

"Don't get me dirty," she warned, holding out a hand in warning.

I picked her up carefully, and her legs wrapped around my hips despite the dirt on my skin.

The soft glow of our frenzy swelled at the contact, and I ignored the urge to pull her closer and capture her mouth in mine. My fingers landed on the backs of her thighs, and it took a damn lot of effort to stop myself from squeezing them.

She held the paper and pen to her chest with one hand, and the other landed on my shoulder. “Maybe I don’t mind the dirt.”

My lips curved upward. “You’ll have no choice but to adapt when you shift.”

“I guess.” Her gaze lingered on my mouth.

I was going to kiss her if I didn’t move, so I moved.

It only took me a moment to get us back up to the entrance and set her down on her feet away from my workspace.

“Thanks. Mind if I sit by you while you work?” Ezra gestured toward an empty bit of stone.

“Please do.”

She gave me a quick smile, then sat down against the wall.

I turned back to what I’d been working on. It took a moment to refocus, but I’d fixed so damn many of the mechanisms in my life that it came naturally to me.

“Is the itch any better?”

“A little. It’s getting stronger overall, but the hot water seemed to help.”

I nodded. “What do you need paper for?”

“I figured I’d better start planning out my human training classes. I’ve never had to consider how to teach people about humans, so I need to have a good outline.” Her voice was light and upbeat, which relaxed my shoulders a bit.

The itch couldn’t have been bothering her too much, if she was still happy.

“Probably wise. We had about a day to come up with how to teach someone from another world about shifters, and couldn’t

think of a damn thing.”

She laughed, and my body relaxed at the sound. “It’s probably harder when you don’t know what their world is like.”

“Or we’re just fools.”

More of her laughter warmed the space.

A moment of silence passed before she spoke again, and it was a peaceful one. “Did I tell you I have a teaching degree? You probably don’t know what that is.”

“I don’t,” I agreed. “But I’d like to.”

“Some humans go to school as young adults, to learn how to function in our chosen professions. I decided I wanted to be a teacher, and teach little kids. When it came time to actually do it, I didn’t enjoy it as much as I expected. I heard that happens with a lot of dream jobs, but... I don’t know. It didn’t feel right.”

“Perhaps your fates knew you would be better suited for my world than yours.”

“Maybe.” Her voice was thoughtful. “I’m not sure to what extent I believe in your version of fate.”

That didn’t surprise me.

It made sense for humans, who had never seen how perfectly matched a fated pair were, to struggle with the idea. Ezra seemed to think logically rather than emotionally much of the time, which likely added to her doubt.

Eventually, she would see the way fated pairs loved each other, and she would likely believe. But even if she didn’t, I would love her however she wanted to be loved, for the rest of our eternities.

She explained, “I do think there’s some significance to the way your universe connected us, and I like the idea of us having made some sort of agreement in a life before this one, but... I don’t know.”

“You will believe it, or you won’t,” I said simply. “Whether you do or don’t, we will enjoy our life together tremendously.”

“You’re so certain about so many things. I respect that a lot, you know.” There was honesty in her voice. “I wish I felt that sure about... well, anything.”

“You recently suffered a great loss, followed by a huge change. The fact that you’re composed and functioning properly is impressive enough, Ezra. Your confidence will follow as you adjust to this new version of your life.”

“Damn, you make me sound strong.”

“It’s not hard to do so, considering your strength.”

“Thank you.” Her voice was soft, but genuine.

“Don’t thank me for providing for you,” I grumbled, just to make her laugh. Knowing what I did about her culture, I was positive her reflexive gratitude wasn’t an insult.

She rewarded me with the loud laugh I’d hoped for, and my lips curved upward as I continued working.

Our conversation faded as we both focused on what we were doing. The quiet was comfortable in a way I had never experienced.

Wolves were pack animals. When I was away from my pack, there was usually some type of pull to get back to them, even when I would rather remain in the comfort of my den. With Ezra working beside me, there was no desire to leave—only peace.

THE HOURS PASSED QUICKLY as I got the mechanism working properly once again, cleaned the parts covered in the worst of the grease and rust, and then slid the wall’s covering back into place.

“It’s done?” Ezra checked, looking at me from above her paper. She was folded into the corner of the room, looking small, soft, and comfortable.

I ached to join her, and her eyes flicked to the pulsing glow around me before lifting back to mine.

Her cheeks flushed slightly, those gorgeous eyes of hers so damn bright I couldn't look away.

"It is. Want to test it out?"

"Definitely." She dropped her notes on the floor and stood, crossing the space in a few steps. Her movements were smoother than they had been when I first found her; her body was certainly adapting to the shifter magic within her. "I just pull it?"

"Yes."

She wrapped her hands around the lever and leaned much more than she needed to.

I fought a grin as she prepared to put her shoulder into the motion, but I lifted a hand to her elbow to stop her before she hurt herself. "Easy. I fixed it, remember?"

"I thought it would still be heavy." She shot me a questioning glance.

"Nope."

She eased up on her position. "Better?"

"Much."

After a quick breath out, she pulled on the lever. It moved smoothly, and the stone slid out of the entrance, opening our cave the rest of the way.

She released the lever and stumbled a bit, the back of her body pressing harder against my front. "Damn, that *was* easy."

I chuckled. "I told you, it had been broken for a while. I didn't expect to be fated to you, or I'd have fixed it long before you arrived."

She flashed me a frown. "Who did you think would be fated to me?"

"We had never seen you, so our guess wasn't based on you, but on us. Worren was among those most desperate for a female, so many of our pack assumed you would be his."

Her nose wrinkled. “I would hope fate wouldn’t pair me with someone just because they were *desperate*.”

My lips curved. “We were *all* desperate, Ez. And frankly, most of the pack didn’t think it was possible for fate to pair us with humans who had come from beyond the veil. Those who did assumed fate would pair the female with the most desperate of us, or the most attractive of us.”

“And which of those categories do you fit into?”

I grinned. “Somewhere around the middle of both, I’d say.”

“How do you decide which guys are most attractive, since you’re all so tall and muscular? I think it’s pretty equal, but that’s just me.”

“Despite our sizes, there are a few different body shapes and hair colors. Those with the lightest and darkest hair are typically considered the most attractive.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “That seems kind of ridiculous to me, but I guess it makes sense that you’d have your own definitions of beauty. What do the most attractive women look like?”

My chest rumbled. “Women.”

She laughed. “No, really.”

“It’s been so long since we’ve had women, the old standards have faded. The most desirable females had the most vibrant hair long ago, but your hair could be the same shade as mine and every male would still be dying to claim you.” I captured a strand of her hair and ran my fingers down the length of it, lifting it to my nose and inhaling her scent deeply. “Veil, you smell incredible.”

“So do you.” She leaned the back of her head against me, and tilted it so our eyes met. “I smelled you in the Broken Woods before you found me. I thought your world just smelled really good until I realized that was your scent.”

Satisfaction flooded me. “I smelled you the moment you landed in my world as well.”

She nodded and lifted her head. “I’m still not sure what to believe about fate.”

“I’m sure enough for both of us.” I brushed my lips against her shoulder, wishing it was bare. “Eventually, you’ll agree.”

She smiled. “I kind of wish your confidence wasn’t so damn attractive.”

My lips curved. “I’m glad it is.” I kissed her shoulder again. “How did your planning go?”

“Pretty well, I think. It’s going to be hard to introduce the human way of living to your people, but I think they’ll figure it out. You sort of have.”

“Sort of?”

“Well, you’ve accepted the boundaries I set, so sort of. But I still don’t think you understand most of my humanness.”

Well, that needed to be remedied.

“You’ll have to give me your class first.”

“Oh, it’ll be multiple classes. I *can* give them to you first, though. That would probably be good practice, and it’ll help me to know what questions your guys will probably have.”

“*My* guys?”

“Well, you’re the alpha. And they’re definitely not *my* guys. Though I guess you said you want them to be mine.”

“They can be yours after you’ve mated yourself to me. And you’ll still be mine far more than you’re theirs.”

“You and your possessiveness,” she teased. “You’re lucky you’re so pretty.”

I grinned again, scooping her up just so I could hear her little squeal, and then carrying her back into the den so I could feed her.

I *was* lucky... but my luck had nothing to do with my looks.

fifteen

EZRA

I WANTED to offer to cook dinner with Ivaylo, but knew he wouldn't love that idea. So, I asked him if he would teach me about Evare's food while he cooked, and he readily agreed.

My ass was planted on the countertop, my legs dangling over the ledge. He told me about the plants that grew in the Broken Woods, and the herbs that were the best for seasoning. They had their own version of salt that was a lot more sour than the Earth kind, but I really liked it.

I described some of the foods on Earth for him, and he taught me about the closest equivalents in Evare, promising I'd get to try all of them when we visited the pack full of mated shifters in the Peaks.

They were much more industrious than his pack, apparently. There were enough of them to run bakeries, shops, and other things that the wolves hadn't bothered with since their numbers began dwindling.

Personally, I thought Ivaylo's pack would be much more appealing to the other Earth humans if they had those things. When I admitted it to Ivaylo, he told me bluntly that if I taught that in my human classes, bakeries and shops would go up quickly.

I countered that I didn't want to force them into anything, and the man legitimately snorted at me.

Anything that would make the women more comfortable would be done, immediately, without question.

Except not biting them if there was a mate run, of course. That wasn't an option.

They didn't have control over it though, so I supposed they couldn't be blamed for it.

We debated whether we could convince the wolves not to *force* their mate runs unless a human woman agreed, and determined we would do our best to persuade them. No one could stop a run if it was fated, but it seemed like there was some leeway, and we hoped we could use that.

Ivaylo and I continued chatting while we ate, and then cleaned up together, still talking.

"So, can you explain the mate run thing to me like I'm completely clueless?" I asked him, flashing a guilty grin his way. "I still don't really get it."

He returned my grin. "I suppose they don't have mate runs on Earth."

"Nope."

"A mate run is basically a type of temporary, frenzy-fueled insanity. In my case, I caught the scent of the woman fate intended for me, the frenzy set in, and I ran to you faster than I've ever moved before. It's different for everyone; some shifters experience a mate run every few years as their body urges them to take a mate. Others never experience a natural run, so they force one."

Huh.

"How can you force one?"

"The frenzy's magic is located here." He tapped his sternum. "Technically, it belongs only to the males of our species. A female shifter has no frenzy of her own, but is tied to the power of the male who bites her when their bond is formed. A mate bond always combines the magic of those it connects."

"So all of this glow is yours?" I gestured around myself. The frenzy's warm magic had swelled through the night, but neither of us had mentioned it.

"Unfortunately for you, yes."

I laughed, and Ivaylo laughed with me.

There was something just so... content about the moment. I enjoyed talking with him, and being around him, in a way I rarely had with anyone on Earth.

“So you force it by...”

“By forcing the magic to your skin, similar to a shift. Many shifters don’t believe in forcing a mate run at all.”

“And you’re one of them?” I checked, remembering him saying that on the night he found me, he hadn’t been with those who were forcing their run.

“Truthfully?”

“Of course.”

He studied me for a moment before finally admitting, “If I met a female I wanted to spend my life with, and she wanted to mate with me as well, I would force a mate run as many times as I had to in order to ensure we could bond. I believe in fate, but I also believe in freedom.”

“Damn, that’s a good answer.”

He continued washing dishes. “I imagined myself being among the last to take a mate, if I ever mated at all. There’s nothing outside of fate that could convince me to force a bond with a female I knew may not want me.”

“You’re not such a bad guy, Vay.” I accepted the final dish as he handed it to me, and he chuckled.

“Thank you. Tell me—what do humans do when they pick a mate?”

“A husband or wife,” I corrected. “And we call it marriage. Where I’m from, when two people get married, they make promises in front of all of their friends and family to stay together for the rest of their lives. Then they usually throw a big party, with cake, flowers, and dancing.”

“And sometimes, the marriages end.”

“Sometimes,” I agreed, stepping back after I put the plate away.

He grimaced, leaning back against the cabinets. “I cannot imagine sealing myself to someone and then parting ways.”

“I don’t think anyone imagines that when they get married. Divorce is a good thing, sometimes. Some relationships aren’t healthy or safe. In Evare, what happens when a woman is tied to a physically abusive male shifter? Or a male is tied to a female who is cruel to him?”

“The pack gets involved,” he said simply. “It’s not possible for a mated shifter to abuse their mate in any way. Their very nature refuses it, and their magic will drive them to take their own life if it does occur. If someone were to lose their mind and grow violent, or hurt an unmated shifter, he or she would be killed by their packmates.”

Ivaylo studied me for a few minutes before adding, “More than anything, mating is about having a companion at your side. Some mates are not intimate after the frenzy. Some do not share beds. Some are of the same gender, and some prefer to keep separate dens. But mating is knowing that you are not alone—that if anything goes wrong, someone else’s mind is at the other end of yours, and you need not be afraid.”

“That’s really beautiful.”

“It is.” He captured my hand and lifted it to his lips. “Will you share a bed with me in this form tonight?”

My face warmed a little as the glow around both of us swelled lightly. “I will.”

With that, he swept me off my feet.

I laughed as the side of my head collided with his chest, and he strode across the room. “I’m not all that tired right now, Vay.”

“Then we will talk in bed.”

We got comfortable beneath the sheets, and I leaned my head against his shoulder as he held me close to his side.

And we talked.

And talked.

And talked.

We didn't stop until I couldn't keep my eyes open for another minute.

And the conversations we had weren't the shallow ones about weather, clothing, and books, that we'd had during our first few weeks together. Instead, we had deep, meaningful conversations about life, love, and purpose.

It may have been the best night of my whole damn life. The sex had been great... but the conversation was even better.

THE FOLLOWING DAYS FLEW BY.

I helped Ivaylo build a ladder, table, and chairs (though he needed no help, and I was nearly useless). I also planned my human lessons, and gave them to him first, scribbling down the questions he asked so I was ready.

Every moment, we were together.

And every moment, we talked.

Though the frenzy grew almost unbearably brighter and hotter, neither of us made a move to act on the desire again.

We had hit a stride of some sort, and it felt like we had come to a silent agreement not to mess with the vibes.

My fur itched madly, my body seeming to struggle with the need to shift, but I couldn't act on that either.

We were focused on getting to know each other and becoming friends, which we both wanted...

But damn, I also wanted Ivaylo to just grab me, kiss me, and growl that he couldn't wait another minute to have me.

ALMOST TWO WEEKS passed with us ignoring the desire of our frenzy, and the morning of my human classes finally arrived.

I woke up alone in bed for the first time in days, and found Ivaylo pacing the den silently.

I watched him silently for a few minutes before finally whispering, “Why are you pacing?”

He halted, his eyes running over me slowly.

Hungrily.

The frenzy pulsed around him like a damn heartbeat.

That wasn't new, and neither was the intensity of his gaze, so I wasn't about to bring it up.

“Couldn't sleep,” he finally said, his voice gravelly.

Ivaylo resumed pacing, and I continued staring at him.

“Why couldn't you sleep?” I asked, after a few minutes of silence.

He didn't respond right away. I had learned from experience that sometimes he needed a few minutes to work through his thoughts, and I could've waited... but I felt bad that he was struggling.

Slipping out of bed, I padded over to him.

He stopped when I stepped into his path. When I wrapped my arms around his back, he grabbed my waist and gripped me lightly.

My voice was soft when I asked, “What's the problem? Tell me, and we'll figure it out.”

He let out a long, slow breath. “I'm trying to remove the problem myself.”

“That's great, but I'm offering to help.”

“You'll be annoyed,” he grumbled back.

I went up on my tiptoes and grabbed his face. “Tell me, Vay.”

He growled, “The thought of you standing in front of my pack and teaching them how to win humans' hearts still makes me violent. If I could trap you here without earning your hatred or theirs, I'd do it in a damn heartbeat.”

Oh.

That actually didn't annoy me; it wasn't even unexpected.

"Okay," I said.

Ivaylo blinked. "Okay, what?"

"*Okay*, it's reasonable for you to feel that. I think we both know we've ignored the frenzy for too long; it's natural for it to drive you to possessive insanity, right? It would be natural even if we hadn't been ignoring it, but we have, and that makes it worse."

"It was more important to get to know each other, than to satisfy the frenzy and get lost in the physical pleasure," he finally said.

"I agree. But we have to be reasonable, and I don't think we are."

His head dipped. "I've been waiting for you to tell me you want more."

A soft laugh escaped me. "I've been waiting for you to tell me you can't stand another minute without being inside me."

His lips curved. "I have far more patience than you realize. I waited centuries for you; what's a few more months?"

My toes curled at his unabashed admission, and the frenzy thrummed around us. I'd been wet between my thighs for *ages*... and it was time to do something about it.

"Stop being patient. Take what you want from me," I said, knowing damn well that he would never take advantage of that permission. I trusted him to take care of me, and to do so even more than I wanted to be taken care of.

"You don't want to give me such complete control, Ez." His thumb dragged over my lips slowly. "I'm not sure you would survive the full force of my desire."

Ohhh.

Damn.

"We won't know unless we try, right?"

He chuckled, low and deep.

And then he leaned down and kissed me.

sixteen

EZRA

THE BRUSH of Ivaylo's mouth on mine was intense.

So intense, it made my world spin.

Of course, it didn't stay a brush; it quickly caught fire.

His mouth made love to mine, the movements slow and hot. The smell of my desire grew thicker—thick enough that I could smell it in the air too.

Ivaylo's hands slid down to my ass and gripped my backside, slowly lifting me higher.

My legs wrapped around his back, pulling his erection tighter to my damp center. The fabric of his shorts was all that separated us, and shit, I wanted it *gone*.

But he was in no hurry.

His fingers slowly dragged over the slickness on my inner thighs, so close to where I wanted them, while he kissed me.

I panted and moved, rocking my hips to use his erection.

Breathing grew too difficult as our mouths moved together, and Ivaylo released my mouth, sucking lightly on my throat as he let me move against him.

"I need you inside me," I said, out of breath.

It had been so damn long—but I was having a hard time reaching the edge of the pleasure I wanted so desperately.

"After you unravel for me."

I groaned, but he cut me off when his fingers brushed my center, and my breath hitched.

My legs parted further as he slowly slid a finger inside me, and my hips jerked, using his erection against my clit.

I struggled to take in air, my body moving against his while he touched me. Every motion dragged me closer to the pleasure I wanted, but it still wasn't enough.

Not with the frenzy rolling through me, demanding I make Ivaylo mine in every way there was.

Not with the itch beneath my skin, struggling to break free.

Not with the knowledge that he ached for me just as much as I ached for him, or even more.

“Shatter for me, Ez.”

I moaned. “I can't. I need you.”

His chest rumbled unhappily. “When I take you, I don't know if I'll be able to stop.”

“Then don't stop.” My nails dug into his shoulders, probably hard enough to leave a mark.

He snarled softly, and my back hit the wall hard enough to knock the breath out of me. His free hand left my ass, and he moved his center away from mine—but a moment later, his cock was against me again, hot and bare and so damn hard.

“You still want me?” he growled.

“More than anything.”

The head of his cock met my slit.

“Tell me what you want again, Ezra.”

“You. I want you.”

“My hands?” He dragged a finger over my clit, making my breath catch again.

Shit, he had a filthy mind. He wanted me to say the words, in detail. To tell him exactly what I wanted.

“I want your cock, buried inside me,” I breathed, and he thrust lightly.

I nearly choked on my own breath at the intense pressure, but he stopped, waiting for more.

“I want you stretching me and taking me, as you fight the urge to fill me with your release seconds after you enter me—and I want to watch your face when you lose control.” As I spoke, he slid in deeper, and deeper.

His gaze was scorching when he stopped again before reaching the end of my channel. “You’ll climax first.”

“If it will make your pleasure more intense, definitely.”

He made a noise of satisfaction, and slid home.

I couldn’t stop my moan when he bottomed out inside me.

He was buried so deep.

So.

Damn.

Deep.

The last time I’d shattered, the instinct to bury my teeth in his throat had raged. I expected it would do the same again, but I wasn’t against it.

If nature demanded I bite him to seal our bond, I would let it take its course. I knew we could create a love strong enough to last.

So, I let myself get lost in the sensations.

His mouth captured mine as he thrust, making me gasp against him. He tilted my head back, changing the angle of my kiss and gripping my ass tighter.

“*Move for me, Ez,*” he rumbled into my mind, his fingers digging into my backside harder as he kept kissing me.

Shit, his grip felt good.

So ridiculously good.

I moved my hips, and his growl of approval dragged me closer to the edge. “*You feel incredible.*”

I wanted to tell him he did too, but my mouth was occupied, and my thoughts were so damn scattered.

Our bodies rocked and moved together, until I was crying out in pleasure. Ivaylo snarled and filled me with his release, and we both came down from the high while he pinned me to the wall. The calming pressure of his body against mine paired with the relief of the climax, and my *fur* stopped itching for the first time in what felt like forever.

“Damn, you’re good,” I mumbled against his ear.

“So are you.” His lips brushed my cheek once, and then again. “I’m glad it’s you, Ez.”

“I’m glad it’s you too.” I closed my eyes and let out a long breath. “Are you going to let me bite you yet?”

His chest rumbled with humor, and his cock throbbed, still buried inside me. “I can’t believe I’m saying it, but no.”

“Vay,” I protested.

“You’re still not certain. You never told me how long humans *date*, either.”

An airy laugh escaped me. “It depends on who you are, how you grew up, and where you live. Around me, when people get married in less than six months, they’re seen as crazy. Honestly, less than a year is still insane to most people.”

“A *year*? Veil.”

“You’re not going to make it a year,” I said with a tired smile.

“Not if you’re actively trying to bite me.”

“Or if we’re actively having sex.”

He made a noise of agreement.

“I think you should stop trying to prevent it and let me bite you when it feels natural. We’re not going to split up even if our bond isn’t sealed, right?”

“Of course not.” His growl made my smile grow.

“Then there’s no point in waiting. We’re friends, and I trust you to take care of me more than I trust myself to. The next time I try to bite you, let me.”

“I’ll consider it.”

I had him with that one.

It was insane—the whole mate bond thing, and the fact that he was a werewolf, and I was too (sort of).

But maybe sanity was overrated.

I’d gotten myself dragged into a magical world, so why not believe in the magic... even as far as the relationships went?

Ivaylo moved a bit, and I sucked in a breath as need hit me again. The frenzy’s glow had vanished, satisfied for the moment... but my body was another story.

He held my hips and slowly slid out of me—before turning me around so my breasts met the wall, and thrusting back into me.

I cried out in pleasure when his fingers teased my clit. My body was braced against the stone as he slowly made love to me from behind, until we climaxed together again.

“You like this position, huh?” I panted to him, my cheek pressed to the wall and my eyes closed as the aftershocks of pleasure rolled through me.

“You have no idea,” he growled back, still stroking my clit lightly. My body clenched around him as he persuaded me back to the edge with his fingers—and then slammed home, making me scream as we found our pleasure together yet again.

Damn, it was blissful.

“We should probably get ready for the human lessons. They’re supposed to start sometime today, right?” I managed to ask him after that climax, though he was still teasing my clit. My body seemed to be in no hurry to walk away from him—and he didn’t need to wait between orgasms the way a human man did, so he certainly didn’t seem ready to stop.

“My pack will already be waiting for you,” he rumbled against my back, still stroking me lightly.

Shit, I didn’t know how I was still enjoying it.

Or how the hell I was getting closer to the edge again.

But I wasn’t about to question it, that was for sure.

“We should go, then,” I mumbled.

“We should,” he agreed.

We didn’t.

Instead, Ivaylo lifted me up and carried me back to bed.

“What are we doing now?” I moaned at him, as he slid out of me and draped me over the edge of the bed on my back. I was nearly mad with both desire and exhaustion, and I still wasn’t ready for it to end.

My mouth went dry as he sank to his knees in front of me—and slowly lowered his mouth to my swollen, soaked core. The evidence of our pleasure leaked down my inner thighs.

He slowly dragged his tongue over the slickness, following it to my center before finding my clit.

My hips jerked, and my cries echoed through the den as he brought me back to the edge—and then filled me again.

BY THE TIME we finally collapsed, I was so damn boneless, I wasn’t sure I’d ever be able to move.

My bare chest was just about glued to his with sweat, and his arms were unbelievably heavy as they draped over my back.

“Damn,” I whispered, not sure what else there was to say, and more than a little bit dazed by all of the pleasure.

“I need to feed you,” Ivaylo rumbled beneath me.

“You don’t always need to feed me.”

“Of course I do.” His hands slid over the small of my back and gripped my ass firmly. “I could feed you at the pack’s den, though. Before your lesson.”

“Or after my lesson, since we were selfish jerks who made everyone wait.”

He chuckled. “They all would’ve done exactly the same thing, and they know it.”

“Guess your possessiveness faded,” I mumbled against his chest.

“For now. You’re covered in my scent.”

“*Dripping* with it, you mean.”

He laughed, and I couldn’t help the grin that stretched my lips.

“I need a shower before we go,” I said.

“Only if you want me grumpy and possessive, Ez.” He squeezed my ass again. “Damn, I love the softness you carry here.”

“That would be an insult to some women on Earth,” I mumbled.

“Earth women need to embrace their beauty, then. This one certainly does.” He squeezed again. “I’ll clean you with a warm towel, so you’re not uncomfortable skipping the shower.”

I was never going to win that argument.

And honestly, I didn’t really care if I did. Werewolves were weird about the possessive thing, and I was just going to have to accept it.

It could’ve been much worse.

I sighed dramatically. “Alright, you’ve convinced me.”

“Thank you.” He brushed a kiss to my cheek, then set me down on my back and slid out of bed. I couldn’t stop myself from watching as his gorgeous ass walked away from me.

The man was so ridiculously perfect.

seventeen

EZRA

WE HEADED out to join the pack shortly after that. I'd interacted with a few of the guys for a few minutes at a time, but never anything more. Looking back, I was fairly certain that had been Ivaylo's possessiveness rearing its head.

His pack *had* respected the distance, though. None of them had attacked him since that first time I met them, and none of them had made any attempt to flirt with me or otherwise suggest I had chosen the wrong wolf.

He was right; they expected his possessiveness and gave us space.

That seemed like a good sign to me. Maybe the pack was in a better state than they seemed.

Then again, it sounded like most of them were on death's doorstep as they warred against the immis that was trying to drive them mad. So... I wasn't really sure what to think.

"You're sure they'll all be gathered, waiting for us?" I murmured to Ivaylo as we walked. He held one of my hands, and his fingers were intertwined with mine.

He didn't hesitate. "Yes."

My other arm was wrapped around my middle, holding the papers that made up my lesson plan to my chest. I had divided it into six different lessons, but my discussions with Ivaylo made me think that we might end up doing it all in one day, so I figured I needed to be prepared.

The men wouldn't be in a hurry to stop learning what they could do to make the future human females more comfortable, after all.

I gripped my lesson plan a bit tighter. "If they're really all gathered, I'd rather eat after the lesson."

"No. I'll make you a plate while you begin, and you can pause to eat as soon as you reach a stopping point. My packmates will accuse me of mistreating you if your stomach growls."

I heaved a sigh. "You're so damn stubborn."

"So are you." He lifted my fist to his lips and brushed a kiss to my knuckles. "I'll answer as many of their questions as I can while you eat. They won't grow bored or anxious."

"I guess that's fair."

"I'm a fair male, so long as you're not trying to convince me to abandon your health." He brushed his lips against my knuckles again, and we reached the den.

Sure enough, the place was full. The couches were occupied by ginormous, tattooed men, most of whom seemed to be in one conversation or another. Some were simply seated, staring at the walls in front of them as if they were barely there at all.

All of the chairs in the kitchen area were full too, and someone had carried in a bunch more to form another line behind the couch, making space for even more men.

The chatter died down as we neared them, and I noticed a small table set up at the front of the room, with two empty chairs behind it.

At least I wouldn't be sitting in front of them alone.

All their eyes were on me, and my grip on Ivaylo's hand tightened.

"You're prepared. And unfortunately for me, they will worship your every word," he said into my mind. *"Do not fear their judgment."*

I nodded lightly, and we walked over to the chairs.

I set my papers down on the table, and Ivaylo brushed a kiss to my lips before he strode away to get me food.

Though I wanted to shoot him a dirty look for abandoning me, I didn't want the rest of the pack to see.

“They will respect you more when you address them without me. Show them how worthy you are of that respect.”

Damn him for wanting me to be independent.

I mean, I was grateful for it.

But still, damn him.

I remained standing for a minute, figuring that would be the best way to make an introduction. “Hi, everyone. I hope this is less awkward for you than it is for me.”

The remark earned me a few chuckles, and a few smiles.

“My name is Ezra Matthews, and as you may know by now, I'm from Earth. Most humans have two or three names, though some of us have even more.”

Surprise flooded some of their gazes, and I could tell I had their attention.

“Like humans in your world, humans on Earth are born into families rather than packs. We're all very different, but similar in a lot of ways that count. To simplify things, I'm going to focus on the relationship side of people from my world, because I know that's what you guys really care about.”

I got a few more nods of approval.

“The first thing you need to understand is that most humans from my part of the world are very slow to tie their life to someone else's.” I launched into an explanation of marriage verses mating, and held the men in fascination. Some of them were taking notes, and others were reading the notes as I spoke, pointing out things they wanted the note-takers to add.

Ivaylo sat down beside me as I reached a decent stopping point, and when he put a utensil in my hand, I got the memo that I needed to stop and eat unless I wanted a grumpy mate.

So, I transitioned into a question-and-answer forum, and Ivaylo answered questions while I ate. I spoke up when he missed something, and he didn't mind the interruptions in the slightest, leaving his hand on my thigh beneath the table.

Everyone could probably see the physical contact, but I didn't mind.

They all knew we were mated, anyway.

"Ezra adapted quickly," one of the men pointed out, gesturing to me as I finished my plate and set my utensil down. "Why shouldn't we expect the others to do the same?"

"I've got this one." I set my hand on top of Ivaylo's. "Serae's magic is focused on finding those who would be glad to leave Earth, right? People who have nothing tying them there anymore? And her magic will take her to a place relative to where I'm from, so it's likely that most of them will be in similar situations?" I asked.

Multiple nods told me I had that correct.

"The thing is, I had a good life on Earth. I wanted to leave because I had no family left, and no passion for my chosen profession. That was it. Not everyone who wants out of their life will be in the same boat; it's safe to say that most of them probably won't be."

I explained abusive relationships, rape, and mental illness. I explained loss, grief, and poverty. I knew they likely had some of those things in Evare, if not all of them, but they definitely didn't have them among the wolves. And from what I could tell of the wolves, they weren't interested in interacting with other types of beings in Evare, magical or nonmagical.

The mood grew slightly more somber as I spoke. The pack listened closely, but I think they understood what I was saying.

Many of the women coming their way wouldn't want relationships. They might not want a family, or even a pack. There was a damn good chance they wouldn't want a mate, on top of that.

But that didn't mean gaining a pack or a mate would hurt them. Maybe it would be exactly what they had never realized

they needed.

And maybe they and the shifters could heal together.

AS I'D STARTED EXPECTING, the conversation went on.

And on.

And on.

The wolves were the best audience I'd ever had, and we burned through my lessons as the hours passed. The suns went down and both moons rose, but the conversation continued.

I could tell Ivaylo was ready to get me out of there so I could sleep, but the men were still actively asking questions. Then, they began crafting a plan to make their land more comfortable for the women.

Some of them started drawing plans for shops, dens for the women, and community buildings. Others made lists of the supplies they'd need, and they all checked with me as the lesson graduated into a pack meeting.

At some point late in the night, Ivaylo set me on his lap. We got a few grins and a few lingering looks, but no one looked disappointed or jealous anymore. They just looked hopeful.

And I guessed that if *someone* could understand the pain of a woman who no longer wanted to live on Earth, it would be the wolf shifters who had battled their own minds for so damn long.

WHEN THE SUNS began to rise, the conversations finally began tapering off. None of the men looked like they were about to go to sleep—all of them had a task, and from what I could tell, an assload of goals.

“Get your female to bed, Alpha,” Rok said, flashing Ivaylo a grin. “You’re lucky we haven’t challenged you for her after you kept her up all night.”

I tensed, half expecting Ivaylo to growl or snarl at his friend.

Instead, he gave a low chuckle and continued holding me securely to his chest. “She would kick your ass for me if you did.”

The men around us laughed. “Probably true.”

“Definitely,” I agreed, though there wasn’t a chance in hell I’d ever attempt to kick a male shifter’s ass.

Then again, he wouldn’t be able to lift a hand against me. So I’d probably win.

Still, it would be better not to bother risking it.

“Am I allowed to take you home yet, Ez?” Ivaylo brushed his stubbly chin over my cheek, and I fought a smile as I pushed his face away. He let me, but plopped a kiss on my forehead as soon as I stopped fighting him.

“I guess.”

“I’ll take it.” He rose to his feet, tucking me against his chest without bothering to let my toes touch the ground. “I’m taking Ezra to the Peaks tomorrow, so I can take a list of the supplies we need. I plan to ask them for some women’s clothes to use as a pattern so we can make our own.”

Nods went around the group, and someone said, “We’ll get a list finished before you’re up and moving.”

“You sew your own clothes?” I asked, surprised, and glanced down at the shirt on my chest. I still wasn’t wearing any underwear, but I’d grown used to that after so long without it.

“Of course we do. We’re self-sustaining, for the most part.” Ivaylo brushed another kiss to my face. We had stayed up *way* too late, but it felt good to give his pack purpose. “Goodnight, everyone.”

A bunch of the others mirrored his goodbye, and he carried me away from the pack.

“That went well, I think,” I said when we were far enough away that no one would hear me.

“I haven’t seen my pack so focused on anything since I’ve been the alpha,” Ivaylo admitted. “Your words will keep my

people alive for as long as it takes them to find a mate they can love. You've given all of us a great gift."

"Coming here is a gift, too," I said, my heavy eyelids beginning to droop. Soon, I wouldn't be able to keep them open any longer. "Think I'm going to sleep."

"Finally." He brushed a hand lightly over my arm, and I smiled softly as I curled against his chest.

My mind was halfway between the sleeping and waking worlds as he carried me into the den and dragged me into bed, getting us settled beneath the blankets.

"I'm falling in love with you," I whisper-mumbled.

His soft response accompanied me into sleep, so similar and yet so different than the one he'd given moments earlier.

"Finally."

eighteen

EZRA

FOR ONCE, Ivaylo was still snoring when I woke up. He didn't snore loudly—just a soft, rhythmic rumble that made my lips curve at the sound.

Damn, I felt good.

My body was glowing a tiny bit, but not enough for me to feel the effects after how insane the frenzy had gotten the last time we ignored it. At some point during the night, I had turned in my sleep and ended up with my head resting on Ivaylo's abdomen.

I opened my eyes, and found myself face to face with his erection.

My cheeks heated.

My body warmed.

The frenzy's weak magic pulsed softly around me, and his reacted in response. His cock throbbed, and I bit my lip as I watched it bob.

His chest rumbled—a sound entirely different than his soft snoring. “You can wake me up with the scent of your desire any damn day you want, Ez. Veil, you can do a hell of a lot more than that. If I'm asleep and you want me, you take me. I'll wake up and enjoy every minute of it.”

My cheeks flushed hotter. “Really?”

“What's the word you say when you lose control? Fuck?”

“Fuck,” I agreed, my eyes still on his bobbing erection.

“Fuck yes, Ezra. Anytime. Anywhere. Any day.” His fingers stroked through the long strands of my hair, combing lightly through the tangles.

He wanted me—that much was really damn clear.

But he wasn't doing anything about it.

“Remember when I said you should take what you want?” I whispered to him.

He chuckled, low and deep. “When I know exactly what you're comfortable with, I will.”

Damn him.

He was going to make me take charge first, *again*.

“What are *you* comfortable with?”

His chuckle graduated into a full-bellied laugh. “Everything, and then some.”

Yeah, the comment didn't surprise me.

We'd kept things pretty vanilla other than him giving me oral and him taking me from behind, but I was pretty sure both had something to do with the wolf thing. I loved it too, so I wasn't about to complain.

Honestly, I had never enjoyed vanilla enough to graduate to chocolate or cookies and cream or whatever.

I wasn't sure I ever would, either, but I could at least keep going with the vanilla stuff.

I'd given one blow job before, and the guy hadn't really enjoyed it, so I wasn't sure I should even bother. But I still wanted to bring Ivaylo pleasure the way he did for me.

“You're thinking hard about something,” he remarked.

“Assuming I tried something—you know, something sexual—and you didn't like it, what would you do?”

He must've heard in my voice that I was serious, because he didn't laugh or tease me. “If you were doing something that wasn't working for me, I would tell you how to do it better.

Politely. While my face was buried in your thighs or my fingers on your clit, if possible.”

Well, that didn't sound so bad.

“How sure are you about that?”

“I'm positive. Even if you did something that wasn't my favorite, I would still enjoy it, if just because you were trying something with me. That takes trust, and I cherish every ounce of trust you give me.”

I hadn't expected him to sell me confidence so damn well.

“You have a lot of ounces at this point. More than I should probably give you,” I admitted.

His erection bobbed, and I bit my lip to stop myself from reaching for him.

I was still a chicken.

His chest rumbled again. “Keep talking to me like that, and I'll have to roll you over and fill you with my cock, Ez.”

Shit.

The frenzy's glow pulsed around me again.

“Can I—”

“Yes.” His answer was fierce enough that I couldn't stop myself any longer.

I reached for his erection, taking it in my hand and earning a low, fierce growl. I slid my face closer to his cock, and the frenzy swelled again as his fingers latched onto my thighs, tugging my lower half up until I was nearly straddling his face, backwards. Though I was still wearing a shirt, I lacked underwear. “Tell me if I do something wrong.”

He rumbled in warning. “I'll tell you how to do it *right*.”

That was a better way to phrase it.

A much, much better way.

I finally lowered my mouth to his cock and wrapped my lips around the head.

He snarled, his fingers digging into my skin a little harder. Not hard enough to leave bruises, but hard enough to let me know he was fighting the urge to grab more of me.

Obviously, I had started correctly.

I bobbed on his erection, taking him a little deeper into my mouth as I held the base of his cock. There wasn't a chance I'd ever be able to take all of him like that, but I'd do my damndest.

"Veil, that is *incredible*, Ez." His voice strained.

Wetness gathered between my thighs at his words, and I sucked.

"*Fuck*, I want you wrapped around me," he hissed. "I want your ass in the air and your hair in my fist as I stretch you and fill you. I want to watch you take my release as you cry out with your own. I want to taste it on your lips and smell it on the air."

He pulled my ass closer to his face, giving me enough room that I could still work his cock with my mouth, while he opened my legs wider.

His fingers slid over my clit before I could think too much about being so exposed to him, and I cried out around his erection as my hips rocked.

"Best view in the world," Ivaylo growled, still toying with me. "Tell me I can do anything I want to you."

I gave a muffled cry of agreement, not nearly as focused on him as I had intended to be.

He didn't seem offended by that, though.

Ivaylo made a noise of satisfaction, and dipped his fingers slowly inside me... then used the slickness to drag them over my back entrance while he continued working my clit.

"You look so damn good like this. Spread open for me, taking my fingers, moving at my touch. You're going to show me how you climax, whenever you're ready."

I bobbed my mouth on his erection again, trying to maintain some semblance of bringing him pleasure. I wanted to see him climax from that angle too, after all.

He continued touching me. “You react perfectly to my touch. Widen your legs for me.”

I spread even wider.

A gasp escaped me when he dragged slick fingers over my asshole again, and teased my back entrance with one of them.

Shit, I hadn't expected that to feel good.

His chest rumbled again, and he kept touching me.

I gave up on doing anything but holding the thickness of his cock in my mouth.

His finger dipped deeper and deeper inside my ass with every swipe, until he was giving me an entirely new sensation that was so intense, I just couldn't take it.

I cried out around his hardness, hips jerking and grip tightening on his erection while he practically purred, “You look stunning like this. Slick, gorgeous, and begging for my cock.”

I slid my mouth off him, ignoring the popping sound as I took a few deep breaths before saying, “I want you to finish in my mouth.”

“Turn around, then. Let me see how well you take me.”

My face would've flushed if I hadn't already been so red from the orgasm.

I turned around on the bed anyway, then peeled my shirt over my head, knowing he'd like the show. When I was bare, I lowered myself to my belly as I got situated between his thighs.

He didn't waste a moment before burying his fingers in my hair. “Tell me if it's too much.”

I rolled my eyes at him, lowering my mouth back to his erection. It throbbed against my lips, and his face twisted in a snarl as I slowly took him in.

He was close.

So damn close.

And I hadn't even moved.

I sucked lightly, and then began.

He swore, bucked, and yanked on my hair as he fought the need to lose control—and it just made me want him more. When he finally erupted, I swallowed his release without a problem. It tasted far better than I ever would've expected—like spices and home.

Ivaylo didn't waste any time sliding out from between my lips. He spun me around and raised me to my hands and knees, slamming into me, claiming my body in the way he knew I wanted him to.

It had taken me time to admit it, but I could no longer deny that I was his.

Or that he was mine.

Or that I didn't have a damn shred of desire to consider sharing my body or life with another man.

I wanted Ivaylo, period.

My teeth lengthened in my mouth as we unraveled together, and the need to bite him hit me hard, but I was too far from his neck.

They shrank back as I collapsed with him on the bed, relaxing in his arms. Silently, I thanked Serae's magic for deciding that I was the perfect human to drag to Evare first.

nineteen

EZRA

AFTER WE CLEANED OURSELVES THOROUGHLY,

we finally left our den. Rok had a large list for us to bring to the pack in the Peaks, and we took it with us as we headed out.

They were about three days away, so we were in for a bit of a trek. I didn't mind riding on Ivaylo's back, though the itch seemed to get worse when I was riding.

The urge to run freely was growing fiercer by the hour, and we had no idea how to reduce it.

I was quiet during our stops and at night, scratching my arms lightly where the itch had grown physical rather than just mental.

Ivaylo seemed worried about me, and made me eat extra even when I explained that I was just itchy. When we went to bed, I tossed and turned, feeling increasingly uncomfortable in the unfamiliar den.

He dragged me closer, wrapping his arms around my torso and securing me to his chest. I struggled to force myself to remain still, despite the comfort of his scent and grasp.

"Want to talk?" he asked me, his grip tight but not uncomfortably so.

"No," I admitted. "I don't know what will help. Or if *anything* will help."

"Tell me your positives, Ez."

Damn him.

I heaved a sigh. “You didn’t run into a tree.”

“Good. You do them in threes, right?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“Give me two more, then.”

“I... didn’t fall off your back.”

“And another.”

“I’m snuggling a big, buff, sexy werewolf,” I grumbled.

“Better?”

“Not really, no.”

He rubbed my back lightly. “Climaxing eased your discomfort before. Let me touch you.”

“I told you, stop asking me. If you want me, just take me. I know you’re too damn good to me to focus on yourself.”

Without any more hesitation, his hand slid between my thighs.

The orgasm definitely helped.

The three that followed it?

Even more.

WHEN WE STARTED RUNNING AGAIN, the itch slowly returned. I was in the same situation again when the evening came around—frustrated, scratching at what felt like invisible bug bites on my arms, and wondering how the hell I could get past it.

I couldn’t stop pacing, so Ivaylo dragged me to the table, refusing to release me until I sat on his lap. When I couldn’t get the food down, he sat me on his cock and fed me while we made love.

It was one of the most intimate things I had ever done, and I went to bed ridiculously satisfied...

But the itch set in again as we ran.

The third night, I was even worse.

He kissed my mouth until I'd calmed down enough to stop scratching, then kissed my core until I forgot how to breathe. After I forgot how to breathe, he filled my body until I couldn't remember my own name.

WHEN WE REACHED the Fractured Peaks, the itch had returned in full force. It was definitely getting worse, not better.

The mountains themselves were beautiful, at least. They were tall and jagged, made of black stone streaked with gray. The cracks that inspired their name ran through them in random places, a few massive ones, and many, many large and small ones.

Trees with the same black trunks and red leaves as those in the lower parts of the Woods seemed to grow straight out of many of those cracks, creating a forest without dirt or decay.

There was no snow on the mountains, but the temperature was still significantly colder. Though it was still comfortable, I missed the warmth of our land. I had never been a fan of cold weather.

Ivaylo stopped a few minutes outside the pack's land, stepping behind a massive tree with me. The Peaks were full of so many cliffs and drop-offs, it would make any sane person's head spin.

I didn't feel like the sanity thing applied to me anymore, not with my body itching to shift to a form it had never occupied.

Ivaylo pulled me into his arms and held me tightly. The pressure of his body against mine helped a little, but not as much as I would've liked.

"We're here, Ez. You made it," he murmured into my ear, still holding me close.

"I don't think I can meet new people right now," I whispered back.

"We haven't tried walking yet. Walk with me."

I wanted to argue, but I didn't have any better ideas, so I nodded. He released me and immediately slipped his fingers between mine. His hand gripped mine firmly, and I hung onto him for dear life as he tugged me back down the smooth trail we'd been following for a while.

"I am not looking forward to climbing back up this mountain," I said as he pulled me along.

"We won't go far. Just enough to get your heart beating. Tell me your positives while we walk." I liked the command in his voice, and reluctantly agreed.

"We still haven't crashed into a tree."

He clicked his tongue. "Not a positive you've used before, Ezra."

Three *new* positives?

Geez, even my grandma hadn't been so demanding.

"The rocks and twigs aren't hurting my feet, thanks to whatever magic you gave me." I gestured toward them.

"My magic will have strengthened them," he agreed. "Two more."

I shot him a dirty look, but tried to come up with something. "You're still with me, and gorgeous."

"That's another duplicate, but considering the topic, I'll allow it."

I rolled my eyes at him, and he flashed me a small grin. His eyes gave away what he was really feeling, so his humor didn't distract me from his clear worry for my sake.

"One more, Ez."

"Alright..." We continued walking downward. "You're taking me further from the people you want me to charm. Since I'm not very charming, that's probably a positive for both of us."

His expression was unamused, so I added, "I've proven that I'm great with elderly people, so that can be the third positive."

“I think you just insulted me.” He slowed and glanced over at me, feigning suspicion.

I couldn't hold back a snort. “It was an unintentional insult, at least. You don't look your age.”

“That only makes it slightly better.” He turned me around and started walking back up the hill. I fought a groan as I started feeling the burn in my calves and thighs. It wasn't nearly as painful as I had expected, but I could still certainly feel it.

“If it's any consolation, you've proven yourself to be great with human women in their twenties.” I paused. “Or at least, with me. If you use your charm to win over any other women now, I'll have to castrate you.”

“It would be well-deserved in that case. And you have my permission.”

I held back a sarcastic response and started walking again. My chest rose and fell a bit faster, but nowhere near as fast as I expected.

Somehow, I had gotten in much better shape since the time I had left Earth.

Something told me it had more to do with the magic than with the many fruits and veggies I'd been eating, because as far as I knew, no amount of Evare's version of broccoli could make me legitimately stronger.

By some miracle, the burning in my lungs and muscles as we trekked back up the steep trail reduced my itching to nearly nothing.

“How did you know this would help?” I panted to Ivaylo.

“It was just a guess. I'm glad it worked,” he admitted, still holding my hand firmly in his own.

I flashed him a tired smile. “So am I.”

He stepped closer to me, and our arms brushed as we continued walking.

A couple holding hands met us partway down the trail. They looked like they were in their late twenties or early thirties,

and I couldn't help but look between the man and Ivaylo. Their faces were nearly identical. They had the same light gray hair and eyes, the same muscles, and the same body shape.

The woman had bright orange hair and glowing blue eyes, but she looked like my mate too. Her grin was similar to his, and their noses were the same too.

Neither of them had the tattoos Ivaylo's pack sported, but I assumed that was a conversation for another time.

The couple had to be his parents.

And damn, that was bizarre.

I knew from his stories that he hadn't called them "mom" or "dad" for ages. Their relationship had become one of friends or siblings after a century.

It was strange to think of living that long. I wasn't sure I could even imagine it, but I guess I'd have plenty of time to come around to it.

If I remembered correctly, his mom's name was Bevvi, and his dad's was Rell. He had never told me whether the names were short for anything, but I figured it made the most sense for me to call them by the same nickname Ivaylo did.

"Please tell me the mark on her neck is yours," Bevvi said to Ivaylo, her eyes flooded with hope.

"It is." Ivaylo stepped closer to me, stopping where we were. "This is Ezra. My mate."

Neither of them seemed disappointed by his lack of matching claim mark.

Bevvi's eyes flooded with tears, and she surged toward us, taking me by surprise when she threw her arms around me. "Thank you," she whispered, her words full of emotion. "Veil, thank you so much."

I wasn't sure what to say in response, so I stayed quiet.

It would feel silly to tell her she was welcome for me mating with Ivaylo. Technically, I still hadn't bitten him, so she didn't have anything to thank me for.

Besides that, staying with him wasn't something I'd done to earn her gratitude. I stayed with him because I cared about him even more than I wanted to admit at that moment.

Thankfully, Bevvi pulled away without waiting for me to respond, wiping at the tears in her eyes. Rell released Ivaylo from a massive hug, grinning broadly. Bevvi flashed Ivaylo a look that I thought was supposed to be chastising, but was far too happy to come off that way. "You didn't tell us Serae finally figured out her spell."

"We didn't know if it would work," Ivaylo admitted. "She insisted, but you know how she is."

His parents nodded, and Bevvi engulfed Ivaylo in a hug—or attempted to, at least. He was so much bigger than her that it wasn't all that *engulfing*.

"But it worked, and of course you were the first to find a mate." She pulled away, and eyed him. "Did you force your run?" Her gaze flicked to me without giving him time to answer. "Did he force his run?"

"Nope. The other guys in the pack were with him when fate took over," I said.

Her shoulders relaxed, and pride flooded her eyes. "Well, you're the one keeping everyone alive. You deserved it the most."

I snorted.

Ivaylo scowled. "No one *deserves it* more than anyone else."

She patted him on the shoulder, shaking her head. "I gave birth to you. I'm allowed to pick favorites."

"Do I smell a newly-mated couple?" a male voice boomed from higher up on the mountain.

I bit my lip to hide a smile when Ivaylo stepped closer to me, his arm going around my waist and holding me securely.

"Ivaylo has a female!" Bevvi called back, stepping away to give us more space.

Ivaylo pulled me tighter to his side as another male shifter came striding down the mountain, wearing a massive grin. “Serae finally came through?”

“She did. Alpha Torix, this is my mate, Ezra.”

“Ezra. You’re from another world, I assume?” He stopped beside Rell and studied me with interest. Since he was just as shirtless as the rest of the werewolves, I could see clearly that he wore a golden claim marking on his neck, declaring that he was mated.

Like Bevvi and Rell, he had no tattoos.

Ivaylo’s grip tightened on my hip anyway.

It hadn’t passed my notice that his dad hadn’t tried to hug me or shake my hand. Since our bond was new and still unsealed, I assumed another man touching me was one of those things that could definitely trigger Ivaylo’s possessiveness.

He didn’t try to stop me from talking, and had never attempted to prevent me from having a normal, friendly conversation with his pack. So, I knew talking wasn’t taboo.

“I’m from Earth,” I explained. “Apparently the humans in my world are like sponges in yours. If we mate with a magical being or live near you guys, we become like you.”

I was extra excited about the *live near you* part.

Not for my sake, but for the sake of the women who came in the future. Not all of them would be fated to unmated shifters, but they would still need a safe, comfortable place to live. A place where they would belong.

Maybe even a place where they could fall in love with life in a way they may not have had the chance to on Earth.

“Come on, I have to introduce you to the rest of the pack’s ladies,” Bevvi declared, looping her arm through mine.

Ivaylo was reluctant to release me, but when he looked at me, I nodded.

What else was there to do?

And besides, I was actually kind of excited to meet the female shifters. It had been too long since I'd been around another woman. I was looking forward to seeing all their vibrant-colored hair and learning what it was really like to be one of them.

I was still itchy, but it wasn't bad enough to interfere with anything related to life, so there was nothing to do about it.

Except bite Ivaylo, but he was still trying to hold out for me to fall in love with him.

I wasn't sure if I was already there or not... but if I wasn't in love with him, I was so damn close to it that I didn't see a point in waiting.

His culture wasn't my own, but that didn't mean I couldn't go with it or believe in it myself.

"Bevvi will fight off the mated males," Rell told Ivaylo with a grin. "Don't worry."

Ivaylo let out a long breath and finally released his hold on me. "I'll check on you in a bit."

"We'll come find you when we're done chatting," Bevvi countered, tugging me away from Ivaylo's side before he could change his mind.

"You may never get her back," the Peaks alpha rumbled behind us, humor in his voice. "They've been dying for new blood, and they know they'll only have her for a day or two." His voice grew more distant as Bevvi led me further up the mountain.

twenty

EZRA

I SPENT the entire day with a huge group of the pack's women. There were so many of them—and they were all thrilled to meet me. Some of them had sons in Ivaylo's pack, and those women's eyes brimmed with tears when they saw me. I was evidence that the guys had a real chance at surviving immis, which was a relief for all of them.

Though Ivaylo checked in on me multiple times, he was satisfied that I was safe, so he left me alone with them.

They explained everything about the mating process to me as if I was brand new to it, and I was grateful to get a summary that aligned with what I'd experienced. I didn't think I had any concern about Ivaylo's truthfulness when it came to the mating thing, but the more they said, the more at ease I felt with my mate.

He had told me the complete truth, and now, I knew that with certainty. It solidified my trust in him, and made me feel more sure that I was making the right choice.

We traded stories about our worlds, and they sewed me *three dozen* sets of clothing in the style they always wore. It was similar to what I was already wearing, but with a bodysuit underneath the large shirt as underwear.

According to the female shifters, my clothes would vanish every time I shifted forms if I didn't strip them off first. The clothes would be lost to a magical void, so the women all wore as little as they could without triggering their mates' possessiveness.

There was no way around losing far too many pieces of clothing, hence the many, many options.

After dinner that night, I walked around the pack's land with Ivaylo and his parents. He held me securely to his side as we moved, and I relaxed against him. Though my *fur* still itched, I was ridiculously content.

We walked and talked for ages, tasting food when we passed homes and were offered it. They were all so friendly and generous, it made my heart warm.

THE PACK HAD a few empty dens for the males from Ivaylo's pack to stay in while they visited, so his parents left us outside one of them after a last round of hugs (except Rell and I; he still didn't touch me, though he did give me a grin).

Ivaylo held my hand and stepped in first, exactly like I expected him to. He tugged me in after him, and my gaze scanned the space slowly. It was smaller than I'd come to realize I preferred—the small dens made me itch almost as much as the huge ones. It was ridiculous, but there was no way around it I supposed.

“How are you feeling?” Ivaylo asked me, leading me to the bathroom for a shower. I was sure I smelled like a bunch of other women, and knew without asking that it would bother him to have my scent so mixed up.

His sensitivity to my scent would relax after our bond was sealed and we settled into our life together, according to the other women. But, it couldn't be avoided for the time being.

“Itchy,” I admitted. “But happy.”

“I suppose it could be worse,” he grumbled, bending down.

My eyebrows shot upward when I saw a bathtub.

A massive, comfortable-looking bathtub that was built into the ground.

“Ohh. We're taking a bath? I didn't know we even had bathtubs in Evare.”

“We do. Our baths are usually in bathing pools, like this one.”
He gestured to the massive tub.

Err, pool.

He turned the water on. There was no point in arguing when I could just drag him in with me, and there was more than enough space in there for both of us.

“The warm water will soothe your itch,” he said, adding a few drops of something to the tub. “The oil will help you sleep.”

I wouldn’t protest to help with sleeping when I already knew I’d struggle in the small room, but that wouldn’t solve the problem. “I don’t think the itch will get any better until I bite you, Vay.”

He growled at me. “Don’t say that.”

“I’m not being negative. It’s just the truth.”

“The truth is that you’re in a transition period, and this transition will end.”

“When I bite you,” I pointed out.

“When you *shift*.”

“I don’t know how to shift, and you still don’t know how to make me shift, do you?” I asked.

He didn’t answer immediately, which made me very, very suspicious.

“Do you?” I repeated, my hands going to my hips.

“The mated males have an idea,” he admitted.

I waited.

He didn’t say anything else.

“How bad can it be?”

“Not *bad*, assuming it works.”

I huffed. “Spit it out already.”

“They suggest that you give in to your instincts, and run.”

I blinked. “That doesn’t sound bad.”

“Not the running.” He let out a long breath, and I remembered what he had said about not running from him so many times.

If I ran, he would chase me.

He said, “It will likely restart my mate run. I’ll lose control over my actions once again, but if you already smell like me and wear my claim mark, there’s a good chance I’ll do a lot more than just bite you.”

My body warmed. The frenzy’s light was soft, but it swelled with his words.

“Would you *like* chasing me?”

“Without the frenzy’s inevitable surge? Yes. There’s little a mated female can do to make her mate’s blood pump more than to run from him.”

Damn.

“So the chasing thing is a wolfy kink?”

He still didn’t turn around to meet my eyes. I had to assume that was because he was worried about what he would see on my face. “Less kink, more nature. It’s a way a female wolf can start a temporary frenzy between herself and her mate, but it’s supposed to be very intense. The mate run is a stronger, wilder version of it.”

I sat down on the edge of the tub. “You know I’m not against intense things. If running will take care of my itch, I’ll run. I’m sure we’ll both enjoy the sex even if you can’t stop yourself. So why aren’t you looking at me?”

When he lifted his gaze to mine, his eyes were glowing much brighter than usual, and were tinged with the same golden color as our frenzy’s magic. “I have little control just discussing this, Ez.”

My body heated. “Maybe you’re the one who should climb in the tub, then.”

His lips curved upward just slightly. “Maybe we should climb in together.”

“That’s not a bad idea.” I tugged my new shirt over my head, and watched those glowing eyes run slowly down my figure in the simple, comfortable bodysuit I wore beneath it. “I have new clothes now, you know. I’m going to look like a real shifter.”

“You already looked like a real shifter,” he said, his eyes lingering on my breasts. “Take the rest off.”

“You first.”

Ivaylo stood, stepping out of his pants without hesitation before striding to my side. His erection jutted toward me proudly, declaring loudly how much he wanted me. His hands landed on my hips and slowly followed the curve of my waist up.

My eyes closed as his hands found my breasts and his thumbs dragged over the points of my nipples.

I bit back a moan as he continued toying with them. “Still want me to take it off?”

“No. I’d rather do that myself.” He stepped closer, and his erection brushed my lower belly. “Or maybe I’ll take *you*, instead.”

My stomach curled. “With clothes in the way *would* be a new challenge.”

“And what shifter can resist a challenge?” he walked me backward until my shoulder blades hit the wall, then released my breasts and turned me around. My chest met the cold stone, and he swept my hair away from my neck so he could lower his lips to my throat. “We aren’t done discussing the running, Ez.” He sucked lightly on my skin, and slid his fingers between my thighs.

My knees knocked together when he found my clit, touching me through the fabric of my bodysuit. “Mmkay.”

“I’m serious.”

“Same.” I sucked in a breath as he worked me with one hand, stopping just long enough to ease the damp fabric away from my core.

“You’re going to take me like this. Spread your thighs.” He nipped at my neck again, and I did as he’d said. “Just like that, Ez. Veil, I love the smell of your desire.”

His fingers stroked my clit again, bare, and I moaned at the feeling. The frenzy’s pulse around us was so soft, I knew the emotions and sensations we were feeling were our own.

The head of his cock found my slit, and his free hand gripped my thigh, pulling me open wider. “Hands in my hair, now.”

I gripped the strands, and he slid home.

I cried out at the intense fullness, my hold tightening as my body clenched around him.

“Damn, you feel good,” he growled into my ear, squeezing my thigh and working my clit roughly.

Our bodies moved together, until I was unraveling around him and he was flooding me with his release. The sounds of our pleasure filled the air, then we were both catching our breath, and panting was all I could hear.

“You’re too good to me,” I finally said, my eyes closed while my chest rose and fell quickly.

“Never,” he growled back, sliding out of me.

We both caught our breath while he peeled the bodysuit off me. My legs popped up into the air as he literally swept me off my feet afterward, and a surprised laugh escaped me at the sudden motion.

“We’re taking that bath together,” Ivaylo told me, striding over to the tub.

A groan escaped me as the blissful warmth engulfed me. “Why don’t we have a bathtub?”

“They’re a pain in the ass to build, and females are the only ones who really enjoy them. Had I known you would be mine ___”

“You would’ve built one in our den, I know,” I mumbled, leaning my head against his shoulder. “And now that I’ve said

I like them, you're going to start one as soon as we get back, I know. How long will it take?"

"A dozen males can get it done in a day. The others are occupied, so probably a few weeks."

"Even if they weren't occupied, you wouldn't let them into our den."

"You're starting to understand me too well, Ez."

"I can say the same about you." I slid my hands into his hair, and felt my itch begin to vanish unnaturally fast as whatever he'd put in the water began to work its magic. "And I *am* going to run from you. Tomorrow, now that you've drugged us with this oil."

"It works well," he grunted. "We can't keep any in our pack; it's too tempting of an escape, and causes a shifter's body to break down over time."

It worked so well that his words didn't even alarm me. "I get it."

"Mmhm. Let me wash your hair so you don't smell like the other women, and we'll go to bed."

I couldn't stop myself from smiling as he started scrubbing my scalp.

twenty-one

EZRA

I EXPECTED to wake up with a headache, considering the strength of that oil he'd put in our bathtub, but instead woke up feeling incredibly relaxed.

It didn't hurt that there was a gorgeous werewolf holding me in his arms, stroking my bare back, either.

Or that he rolled me over and made love to me with his mouth.

Or that he dragged me back to the bathtub and snuggled with me in the deliciously-hot water before he finally let me leave the borrowed den.

I was thoroughly calm when we finally rejoined the mated pack.

The men spent the day gathering and loading the supplies our pack needed onto a sled of some kind for Ivaylo to pull. I offered to help, but was shooed away by literally every man and woman in the pack, plus Ivaylo.

So instead, I spent the day learning how to cook a chocolatey dessert that shifter men were known to love. It may have been the best thing I'd ever tasted—way better than the candy bar I'd dragged through the portal with me all those weeks ago.

The women let me know that baking was how they made things more equal between them and their mates. The men would make dinner, and the women would make dessert.

It summarized the relationship a shifter couple shared, they told me. The man typically took care of his woman's needs, and the woman brought him the joy and pleasure he lacked

without her. Same-gender mated couples determined their own dynamics, and everyone respected their right to make their own decisions, but the male/female couples had their own version of traditional gender roles.

I doubted those roles would hold up in Ivaylo's pack when more human women started pairing up with the wolves, but we would have to wait and see.

THE DAY PASSED QUICKLY, and I couldn't help but feel a heady hit of pride when Ivaylo came to find me. He tried the dessert we'd made, and gave me a heart-stopping grin that made me feel like maybe I would make it as a shifter after all.

We stayed up late with some of Ivaylo's old friends in the pack, talking and laughing as we shared stories. A few of them played instruments that reminded me of guitars as we sat around a small fire. I had never enjoyed myself so much with anyone except my grandparents, and found myself yearning for more of it.

Would our pack be like that after Serae brought more Earth women to Evare?

Would we find that casual comfort?

Would our pack feel like home?

Damn, I hoped so.

I WAS SO comfortable snuggled up with Ivaylo that I drifted off to sleep at some point during the night. He carried me back to our borrowed den, and I fell back asleep immediately when he pulled my back to his chest, engulfing me in his warm, strong body.

AN INTENSE ITCH woke me from sleep a few hours after Ivaylo tucked us in. I bit my cheek to stop myself from scratching my arms and legs, fighting the urge to shove myself out of bed and run until my body gave out.

The itch was too much.

It was just too damn much.

I couldn't wait any longer; I had to run.

"I'm sorry," I whispered harshly to Ivaylo, as I climbed over him.

"What?" I loved his sleepy voice, but I couldn't pay it the attention it deserved.

I was already rushing toward the den's exit.

"I'm sorry," I called out, desperation clawing at my throat.

My bare feet met the hard, cold stone of the Peaks a moment later, and then I was running.

The itch grew stronger, and I pushed harder, running faster. Trees flew past me at a speed they certainly never had on Earth, and the fierce tingle of magic rolled over my skin.

There was a howl behind me—Ivaylo's howl.

He was coming.

The tingle rolled over me again, more painfully than before.

I stumbled over a jagged bit of rock, tripping over a crack in the mountain. The drop on the opposite side was only a few feet, but my arms went out in front of me in an attempt to ease my landing.

They did, but they did much differently than I expected.

As I fell, I watched in a mixture of shock and horror as my skin rippled, and then transformed into a coat of bright red fur.

I landed smoothly on four *paws*.

Though I wanted to take a minute to stop and stare at myself, at my *fur*, I couldn't do it.

The urge to run and the itch of my fur was still too damn strong.

And after shifting, I could hear Ivaylo's paws on the stone behind me.

He was still coming.

My claws made a grating noise as I shot into the forest, barreling through the trees and moving deeper into the Peaks. My body felt so strange, but at the same time, so *right*. The paws felt like mine, and every movement was a natural stretch and flex of muscle that was somehow, inexplicably my own.

I was a shifter.

I was a *wolf*.

And I couldn't help but wonder if that was exactly what I was always meant to be.

It felt right.

I felt right.

Maybe I believed in fate after all.

I sure as hell believed that it was right about me and Ivaylo, if nothing else.

The wind tugged at my thick fur as I ran, throwing everything I had into the sprint to get further from my mate.

MY CHEST ROSE and fell rapidly as branches broke at my back.

Ivaylo was done chasing me.

Now, he was going to make sure I knew I was his.

And when we were done, he was going to be damn sure he was mine too.

His scent grew stronger as he covered more ground, and after a moment of silence, a hard, hot body collided with my side.

Thick arms wrapped around me as our frenzy flared, its heat forcing me to shift back instantly. Ivaylo and I rolled through the air once, and then again, before his back hit the ground.

The force propelled us to roll a few more times, and he managed to take all of the impact with his forearms, so it didn't hurt me in the slightest.

Our hearts pounded together when we finally stopped rolling.

His glowing, frenzy-golden eyes stared down at me from above.

“You are mine, female,” he said, the words gravelly enough to make goosebumps emerge on my skin. Both of us glowed brightly, and I was so wet between my thighs, it made my world spin.

My own chest rumbled slightly with his words. The rumble caught me off guard, and I started to lift a hand to my sternum.

Before I could, his hands were on my thighs, opening me up.

My lips parted and my eyes widened as he thrust inside me in one harsh motion, filling me hard and fast.

His teeth sank into my neck in the same place they had the first time we met. I cried out as an orgasm tore through me, rough and powerful.

My teeth lengthened in my mouth as he continued slamming into me. I would’ve called it *fucking*, if we’d been on Earth, but it was so much more than that. So damn much more.

Our bodies merged, warred, and melded, but it wasn’t just physical. The pleasure, need, and joy that swelled within me was soul-deep, and I wanted it to last.

I wanted it to be permanent.

Ivaylo snarled at me when my mouth found the skin where his shoulder met his neck.

I was going to make him mine.

My teeth sank into his skin, and he roared to the forest around us as he slammed into me, harder and deeper, losing himself in the pleasure of being claimed.

The gold slowly began to fade from his eyes as he came down from the high of his climax. He rolled onto his back, hauling me with him. My palms landed on his abdomen as I sat on top, my body still wrapped around his.

“Take me, Ezra,” he said in a gravelly voice. “I am yours.”

My throat swelled, and I nodded, not willing or able to fight with him.

My hips moved, and I sucked in a sharp breath.

His hands found my hips, gripping and kneading as I moved against him, using his body to make myself feel good. A male wolf liked—*needed*—to be in charge, but I was his mate, and he was making sure I knew that made us equals.

Ivaylo growled and swore as my movements grew more desperate.

“I want you to climax with me,” I breathed to him.

His eyes blazed, not an ounce of gold remaining as his grip on my hips tightened, and he moved with me without changing our positions.

My orgasm came hard and fast, and my screams of pleasure cut through the forest. Ivaylo roared with me, taking his pleasure as violently as I’d taken mine.

I collapsed on his chest, and both of us sucked in air as the frenzy slowly faded away. When it was gone, there wasn’t even a hint of a glow remaining.

“It’s over,” I said, still catching my breath.

“Finally.” His hands wrapped around my face, and I closed my eyes at the bliss of his touch. “You’ll never be free of me now, Ez.”

A soft laugh escaped me. “That was kind of the point.”

He chuckled, his chest rumbling in satisfaction. “You are the most stunning wolf I have ever seen.”

“Pretty sure you have to say that now.”

“You know me well enough to be certain I would never lie to you.” His thumb ran slowly over my lips. “Have you found my emotions?”

I wasn’t sure exactly how to do that, but I could feel the presence of his mind pressing lightly against mine. It felt similar when he spoke mentally to me, but different as well. Something told me the connection would feel like that permanently, even when we weren’t speaking mind-to-mind.

I mentally reached toward the place I could feel his consciousness, and sucked in a breath when I found his emotions lingering at the surface.

Pride.

Joy.

Relief.

Pleasure.

Gratitude.

Happiness.

Possessiveness.

Security.

“Shit, you feel a *lot*.”

“As do you. The press of your mind on mine is blissful.”

“How am I supposed to know if you’re lying?”

His lips curved wickedly. “I’m not attracted to you.”

I winced at the sharp pain that radiated between us. “Damn.”

“I’m not in love with you, Ezra.”

The reverberating pain had me smacking him lightly on the cheek while I bit back a grin. “Stop it. That stings.”

“You want me to speak the truth then, female?” He pulled my face down to his and pressed his lips to mine lightly.

“Yes,” I said, my mouth brushing his as I spoke.

“I love you more than I ever imagined I would be capable of. I wanted a mate fiercely, but I never imagined how it would feel to have her. To have *you*. To feel you in my arms, your chest shaking as you laugh. To see the light in your eyes as you smile, and feel the softness of your hair on my skin as you move. You hold me captive, mate. I love you. I want you. I cherish you. You are my mate, and I am privileged to be yours. That is my truth.”

My eyes flooded with tears. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I’m in love with you too. It happened so much faster than I

ever would've believed—but it can't be anything else.”

His chest rumbled, and his lips captured mine for a long, slow kiss before he pulled away. “Say it again.”

“I love you, Vay.”

His mouth stole mine again, his tongue slowly claiming every inch of my mouth as his mind brushed mine. “*You are so much more than I ever dared dream.*”

“*So are you. Now, I want to see what sex feels like when your emotions are rolling through my mind.*”

“*I'm more than happy to oblige.*” He rolled me over, and neither of us pulled away as my back hit the stone. “*And then we run together, as wolves.*”

“*Deal.*”

His mind opened to mine, and I lost myself in the feeling of both his pleasure and my own.

Damn, it was good to be mated.

twenty-two

EZRA

WE SPENT the rest of the night in the forest, reluctantly heading back to our borrowed den as the suns rose above the Fractured Peaks. Ivaylo's side brushed mine with nearly every step we took, our bodies touching as much as they possibly could.

The mark I'd left on his neck glowed golden, and I couldn't stop my jaws from parting in a wolfy grin every time I saw it.

He was mine, permanently.

For better or worse.

Even in death, we wouldn't be apart.

We were nearly back when I noticed a new smell in the air, off to my right.

"Veil," Ivaylo growled into my mind, apparently catching the scent at the same time I did. *"Dammit, Serae."*

"What?" I demanded, growing worried.

"There's an Earth human in the Peaks. I smell the witch with her."

My eyes widened. *"Do you think Serae sent our pack hunting for her?"*

"I have no idea. Follow me." He picked up his pace, and I ran behind him. Excitement coursed through my veins as we went.

It didn't take long for us to reach them. I could hear Serae giving the girl an even worse introduction to Evare than I had received.

“The wolves will find you,” the witch said, her voice already slurring. “One will bite you.”

“What the hell?” the human woman shrieked.

“Let me handle this,” I told Ivaylo. *“Stay hidden for a few minutes, and stay in your wolf form, too.”*

He growled at me, but agreed.

I shifted as we reached them, and stepped into the clearing completely naked. Serae grinned when she saw me. Her body was sagging with exhaustion, yet still unnaturally beautiful as her white hair blew in a soft breeze around her.

“You’re fitting right in with the locals, I see.”

My lips curved upward. “You could say that. I’ll take it from here.”

“Thanks.” She winked at me. “Tell the wolves I’ll be back quicker next time. I’ll start adjusting to the magic soon.”

With that, she vanished.

I turned to the human woman, taking her in quickly. She was tall and slim, her face gaunt with exhaustion. Her arms were wrapped around her middle, but there was no fear in her eyes as her soft, blonde ponytail was tugged in the same breeze that blew at Serae.

To be honest, I wasn’t entirely sure how to introduce her to our new world. So, I just opened my mouth and said the first words that came to my mind:

“I’m Ezra. Welcome to Evare.”

It was going to be a rough start... but mine had been rough too, and I wouldn’t have changed a damn minute of it.

twenty-three

“YOUR HUMANS CAN WAIT a few minutes, Ez,” I said, dragging her back to the bathing pool I’d finally managed to finish installing a few weeks earlier.

“We both know a few minutes won’t be enough,” she countered, though her arms went around my neck as I pulled her into the pool with me.

“Then they’ll survive another hour without you.”

She relaxed in my arms as the hot water began to work its magic on her. I was starting to enjoy our baths almost as much as my female did.

“You know some of them still get nervous without me. I worry about them.”

“They know where to find each other. You can help them when the tension in your shoulders is gone.”

She gave me a half-hearted huff. “I never win these fights with you.”

“And you never will.” I pulled her closer, and she tucked her head against my neck.

“Maybe I should be glad about that. You’re right; I needed this,” she mumbled.

“I know you well.” My fingers caught her hair, beginning to unravel the complex braids one of the other females had crafted for Ezra.

“Do you think we should be worried about the girls? Or about our guys? Nothing is happening as fast as the pack hoped it would.”

“No. Our men are still holding strong, and none of them battle immis anymore. That’s what matters.”

“You’re right.” She let out a soft sigh. “You’re always right. I love you.”

“I love you too.” My lips brushed her bare shoulder.

Veil, she was so damn gorgeous.

I finished unraveling her braids and washed her hair, then persuaded her to eat a few of the chocolate pastries she had grown obsessed with making. It was still morning, but she tended to run herself ragged, so she needed all the food I could get her to eat.

I kissed her shoulder again, after I was satisfied that she’d relaxed, had her hair washed, and eaten enough. “Ready to face them again?”

“So ready,” she whispered.

I chuckled.

Her lips curved upward against my neck. “You’re a good friend, you know.”

“The best,” I agreed.

Her laughter filled the den, and joy swelled within me.

I had waited hundreds of years to find her... and I would wait every minute of it again if it meant having her in my arms, wearing the mark of my claim, and loving me so perfectly.

epilogue

EZRA—A FEW YEARS LATER

THE WIND RUSHED through my fur as Ivaylo and I wove through the Woods together. My jaws felt permanently parted in a wolfy grin, and I didn't think my happiness would ever fade.

The final single member of our pack had sealed his mate bond with one of our humans.

We were done.

I mean, technically we were still the alphas.

But, our jobs had gotten so damn much easier as everyone paired up.

There was no immis to worry about anymore. Hell, the only thing left to worry about, was the kids.

Alllll the kids.

A dozen of our women were pregnant, and a handful had infants and toddlers. When the first one announced her pregnancy, Serae had "blessed" us with magic that was supposed to help even out our population.

How did it do that?

By ensuring that all the ex-humans could only have daughters, to balance the shifters from the Peaks only being able to have sons.

Words were had, when we found out about her magic.

Strong, angry words.

And then we just decided to accept it, and moved on. Stealing women from Earth wasn't exactly a steady or healthy way to strengthen our society, after all.

When the first few babies were born, a few pregnant women and some women with infants from the Peaks had moved down to join our pack, so their sons would grow up around little girls their age.

As more babies were born or conceived in our pack, more women in the other pack got pregnant, and moved in.

So, there were kids to deal with.

Lots of kids.

But I knew how to deal with kids, and the fact that they could shift into wolf pups made them the most adorable little creatures on the planet. I loved playing with them, and luckily, most of them seemed to like me too.

Ivaylo and I agreed we were nowhere near ready to make one of our own, but he was even better with the little monsters than I was, and I loved seeing him with them.

But anyway, our final single pack member was mated.

And now, Ivaylo and I were celebrating with a vacation we'd been talking about for years. He was taking me to one of the beaches outside the Shattered Hills, and we were going to spend a week with the sand between our toes and the suns shining on our skin. There would be plenty of beach sex to round it out, too.

I had started seeing bits of the ocean on the horizon a few minutes earlier, so I knew we were getting close.

Finally, we broke through the tree line, and let momentum carry us down the last of the hills. The reddish-brown dirt transformed into thick, soft sand of the same color, and I shifted without hesitation.

My eyes closed as my feet sank into the sand, bringing back memories upon memories.

Not of my difficult time in Savannah, but of all the fun I'd had as a kid, my grandma and grandpa laughing with me.

Memories of the sandcastles we'd built, and the steady love I had felt.

It was hard to believe that my life had transformed into the one I currently lived.

One where I was an alpha wolf shifter, with people depending on me and a mate I loved more than I had ever imagined was possible.

Ivaylo's hand captured mine, his fingers sliding naturally into the gaps between my own. "I knew you'd love it," he said with a grin.

His emotions drifted over me—pride, happiness, and contentment.

"It's gorgeous," I admitted, staring out at the huge, crashing waves. "And damn, I'm proud of you. You kept those guys alive, and now, they're going to stay that way."

His grin remained fixed. "We all kept each other alive. I was just the... choreographer."

I laughed. As far as either of us knew, there was no such thing as a choreographer in Evare. The shifters had probably learned more about Earth than they had ever wanted to, but it made us feel more understood, so all of us enjoyed it.

"Even choreographers usually get flowers and chocolates after a show. Especially one that lasted half a century."

His expression grew slightly wistful. "I lost a lot of friends before that half-century. I wish all of them could've made it here to see this."

My throat swelled as the strength of his grief washed over me.

The wolf shifters were finally starting to grow again, but I didn't think any of them would ever forget their losses.

And honestly, I didn't think loss was meant to be forgotten. I think it was meant to remind all of us that life is short, and in the grand scheme of things, only a few things really mattered.

I stepped closer to Ivaylo, and he slid an arm over my shoulder, tugging me to his side. "I'm glad you're here," he

said simply, brushing a kiss to my forehead before looking out at the water.

“So am I.” I leaned my head against his shoulder.

We both knew grief.

We both knew loss.

But we had never let it break us—and we never would.

second epilogue

“HOW LONG HAVE *you been standing here, staring at her?*” Ivaylo murmured into my mind.

My gaze lifted to the doorway of the cozy room we’d added to our den, and lingered on my mate for just a moment before returning to the fragile, redheaded creature in the crib. “*Too long, probably.*”

My mate’s footsteps were silent as he crossed the room and stepped up beside me, tucking me against his side. After so many years together, there was no awkwardness, anger, or confusion. Even as we adjusted to life with a baby, we knew each other so damn well that there were no arguments.

Our strengths and weaknesses flattered one another’s, and we were a team.

Which was why he knew exactly where to find me when he got home from the pack dinner twenty minutes after I left to put Irene to sleep.

We had named her after my grandmother, because my grandpa was right; every little girl needed a strong name.

“*I think I could stand here and watch her breathe all night,*” Ivaylo admitted.

“*Me too. There’s something magical about her, don’t you think?*”

“*Well, she’s our daughter. Of course she’s magical.*”

We exchanged grins.

“Take a shower with me. You reek of other women,” Ivaylo said, his voice playful rather than growly, like it would’ve been when we were first establishing our relationship.

“I always reek of other women,” I teased, but let him pull me out of the nursery and into the bathroom.

“Thankfully, I’m here to fix that.” He turned the water on and tugged my clothes off, followed by his own. *“Soon, you’ll smell of nothing but me.”*

I sighed dramatically. *“Our baby won’t even recognize my scent.”*

“I have to convince her to favor me somehow.”

When I laughed, he grinned with me.

Veil, he was the perfect man, and my absolute best friend.

He tugged me beneath the water, and our bodies met in a blissful, warm embrace. My arms went around his neck, and I hugged him tightly.

He hugged me back, brushing a kiss to my forehead and murmuring aloud, “I love you, Ez.”

“I love you too, Vay.”

His lips caught mine, and as our bodies melded, I could’ve sworn our souls did too.

Fate had gotten our connection very, very right.

afterthoughts

I used to want to write complex, elegant books that made people think.

Then, I started writing.

And kept writing.

At this point, I've realized I'm just a sucker for a book that makes me smile and provides a little escape.

Life is crazy, painful, and complicated, but it makes me happy that my books don't have to be any of those things if I don't want them to.

As you may know if you read the afterthoughts in *Dark & Deadly Predators*, I had a miscarriage a few months before I wrote this book. My grief made it difficult to write the fun stories I had been focusing on, so I pivoted and got a little more serious.

With this book, I started pivoting back.

It was... harder than I expected.

I still don't feel completely like myself. I hope I'll get there, and I think I will, but healing takes time.

Life is a bumpy ride, but a beautiful one.

And hey, at least I have some fun, sexy werewolves strapped into this roller-coaster with me ;) Gotta find the positives! My werewolf obsession isn't as strong as it used to be, but it's clearly still present.

Anyway, thank you so much for reading! I hope my book made you smile, and gave you a little escape too. Rok's story will come next, so check out *Lost in the Fractured Peaks* if you're interested in reading more about the pack! Keep flipping through the book for a peek at the first chapter. Worren will have his HEA too, of course, but it might take him a minute to get there ;)

All the love,
Lola Glass <3

stay in touch

I try to offer a bonus epilogue for signing up for my email updates... but I just couldn't resist putting it in the back of the book this time.

Oh well!

So, if you want to join my newsletter anyway, use this link:

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You'll only receive updates when new books release. No spam!

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*sample of lost in the fractured
peaks*

RORY

I STARED out at the river, wondering if there was really a black-market way to receive a new identity. The water moved rapidly, and the heavy grayness in the sky was accompanied by a miserable, chilly drizzle.

The movies made the black market sound so *real*. I'd googled it, but all that had done was make me paranoid the government was going to send someone after me just for looking it up.

My phone buzzed, and I didn't have to look down to know who the text was from, or what it would say.

I looked down anyway.

Allen: Where are you?

Letting out a long, quiet sigh, I closed my eyes.

There had been red flags.

So many red flags.

So *damn* many red flags.

But I'd been so lonely, and he'd paid attention to me.

So, I forced myself to act colorblind. The red was green, and I insisted to myself that everything would work it.

It hadn't worked, obviously.

And now, here I was.

Trapped in an abusive relationship.

I had stopped trying to hide the bruises, and everyone at work had stopped asking about them. I'd tried to leave... and he had

chased me.

Repeatedly.

If I tried to leave again, there was a good chance I wouldn't survive it.

My parents and older sister were held captive by their drug addictions, so they wouldn't help me unless I offered them money. And unfortunately, Allen controlled that too.

I had nothing, and no one.

Even if my google search had brought me to the black market, I wouldn't have been able to pay for the new life I needed.

My phone buzzed again.

And again.

And again.

I fought the urge to throw it into the damn river.

The texts were more of his usual:

Allen: Who are you with?

Allen: What are you doing?

Allen: I'll be there in ten minutes.

Tears welled in my eyes, and I pushed my long, damp blonde hair off my face.

A woman sat down on the bench beside me, but I didn't look her way. I was so tired of lying about being okay.

"What's your name?" she asked me.

"Rory," I said quietly.

"Pretty. I'm Serae."

If she was asking about my name, she wasn't asking about the bruises, at least.

"You're crying, Rory," the woman added.

My throat swelled.

Dammit, couldn't we stick to the names?

Why did we need to talk at all?

“There’s a bruise on your cheek,” she added. “I can help you, you know.”

My head jerked toward her.

The woman was gorgeous, with thick, white curls, dark skin, and the biggest blue eyes I’d ever seen.

Something about her was... otherworldly.

That was probably just because she’d offered to help me, though.

“How?” My voice edged on desperation. “Nothing has worked.

My phone was vibrating again, but neither of us acknowledged its motion beside me on the bench.

“Give me your hand.” She held out her palm.

I didn’t know how that would help, but I didn’t stop and wonder. My hand was in hers a heartbeat later.

The moment our skin touched, light swelled around us. My lips parted in wonder—or horror—as the light swallowed everything around me for a moment.

The woman’s grip on my hand tightened and didn’t let go, not that I tried to pull away.

Who was she?

What was she?

Did she have some kind of... magic?

Damn, I hoped so.

The light faded a moment later.

When my vision cleared, my lips parted in wonder.

The river in front of me was gone completely, replaced by a wall of rich black stone with swirling gray streaks. There were deep, winding cracks in the stone, and small plants grew from them at an angle, jutting toward me.

I turned around halfway, and my jaw legitimately fell open when my gaze moved over the horizon.

Mountains—I was in the mountains.

Huge, stone mountains covered in trees with massive black trunks and blood red leaves. Out in front of me, a massive forest of red-leaf trees stretched as far as I could see.

“This isn’t Earth,” I whispered.

“No, it’s not. Welcome to Evare, Rory. The wolves will find you soon.”

I looked back at her, and found her eyes glowing brightly. Considering I knew she had magic, the glowing eyes didn’t seem like a stretch. “The wolves?”

“Wolf shifters,” she clarified.

“*Werewolves?*” My voice was incredulous.

“Like you said, this isn’t Earth.” She flashed me a smile, though her expression looked... tired. “The wolf shifters need mates to stay alive. I cursed them permanently, on accident. You’re here to mate with one of them.”

My eyebrows shot upward. “What does that mean?”

“The humans I know call it irreversible arranged marriage. It’ll start with a guy biting you.”

My eyebrows raised forward. “Irreversible arranged marriage? And *biting* me?”

“Yep.” Her smile faded, and her eyes closed for a long moment. “I’ve got to stop doing this. Only forty-four more to go.”

“Forty-four more *what?*”

“Don’t worry about it. Just... stay here. The wolves will find you soon,” she repeated, and then patted my knee lightly. “The shifters can’t hurt their women; it would kill them. You’ll be safe here.”

With that, she disappeared.

Literally, she just *vanished*.

“What the hell?” I turned around on the bench so I could see the view again, and my knee bumped something.

My phone.

I looked down at it, tense and nervous... but it had stopped vibrating.

My hands trembled a little as I picked it up and tapped the screen.

No service.

I could see Allen’s last few texts, but he couldn’t send anymore.

And he couldn’t track me, or find me.

Or hurt me.

Tears stung my eyes again, for an entirely different reason.

I stood up quickly, striding toward a massive cliff off to the side of my bench. My hair blew around my face, still slightly damp from the drizzle back on Earth, but I paid it no attention.

I was *free*.

And I was getting rid of that damn phone.

The toes of my black high-tops dug into the smooth stone as I reached the ledge.. There was probably an insane gleam in my eyes, but I didn’t care.

I’d embrace the hell out of the insanity if I had to.

I pulled my arm back, and without a moment of hesitation, launched my phone off the cliff.

Allen would never control me again.

No one would ever control me again.

My gaze went back to the bench, my chest rising and falling quickly. Serae had told me to wait for the wolves there. I didn’t want to get tangled up in whatever weird *irreversible arranged marriage* they had, but wolves were dangerous. If I tried to run from them, they could probably track me, and it wasn’t like I could outrun them.

Vowing to myself that no matter what happened, I would never let a man treat me poorly again, I walked back to the bench.

And I waited.

The waiting went on for so long that the suns in the sky—yes, plural, I spotted three—went down, and two moons went up.

Two moons.

Three suns.

Definitely not on Earth anymore, which made me smile.

My growling stomach did not make me smile, however.

I was getting too hungry to remain on the bench, and without knowing when the supposed werewolves would show up, I didn't really want to risk staying where I was.

So, I finally got up and made my way back to the cliff I'd thrown my phone from. It was getting colder by the hour, so I was glad I had on a comfortable sweatshirt, and had pulled the hood over my head to keep my ears and neck warm. If I'd known I'd be out in the cold, I would've worn an extra pair of leggings, but I hadn't known. So, my legs were cold.

I eyed the cliff's drop-off with a grimace.

There was no chance I'd survive that fall.

Shuffling along the edge of it, I looked for a smaller drop.

No dice.

I heaved a sigh and walked back to my bench, plopping down with a grimace.

Guess I was back to waiting.

I dozed on and off through the night, until a howl in the distance woke me.

Jerking awake, I turned my chest to the bench's back and peered out at the forest below me.

I couldn't see anything, but I'd heard a howl. That had to be a wolf, didn't it?

A few minutes passed.

Long, long minutes.

Finally, I heard something scratching against stone, and scrambled over to the ledge.

My eyes widened when I saw a man below me, scaling the cliff without any visible gear. His gaze lifted upward, and his glowing golden eyes froze me in place.

When he pulled his gaze from mine, he started climbing faster.

I walked backward slowly, until I hit the wall. I had barely seen the man, but those golden eyes were creepy.

What was I going to do if he tried to hurt me? I was short and skinny, and I'd never been able to protect myself from Allen before. Serae said werewolves couldn't hurt women, but why should I trust her? She had abandoned me.

Fear clenched in my abdomen as the man's head cleared the ledge of the cliff, followed by the rest of him.

My eyes widened in horror as he stood in front of me.

He was completely naked, glowing the same gold as his eyes, and huge *everywhere*. His light skin was absolutely covered in black and gray tattoos, and the muscles on him were outrageously large. His shaggy black curls would've been considered attractive by most women, but I no longer allowed myself to be attracted to dangerous men.

Or any men, really.

Or any women, for that matter.

Love and attraction were clearly not compatible with me.

Especially as they applied to a man who could kill me with his bare hands, without breaking a sweat.

A soft whimper escaped me when his eyes caught mine.

He looked me up and down slowly, then gave a terrifying rumble, and prowled toward me.

“Don’t hurt me,” I whispered. “Please, don’t hurt me.”

He covered the distance between us, and then stopped just a breath in front of me. He was at least a foot and a half taller than my 5’0”, so I didn’t think he’d even need to *hurt* me. He could just squash me with his damn foot.

My chest rose and fell rapidly as he reached for me, and I squeezed my eyes shut against the fear.

Instead of causing me pain, his fingers caught the hood of my sweatshirt, and pushed it away from my face.

Then, his palms landed lightly on my shoulders.

So much more lightly than I expected.

A savage snarl escaped him, and I tensed in response. “Who hurt you?”

Who...

What?

I couldn’t stop myself from peeking my eyes open just a little.

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about the author

Lola is a book-lover with a *slight* romance obsession and a passion for love—real love. Not the flowers-and-chocolates kind of love, but the kind where two people build a relationship strong enough to last. That's the kind of relationship she loves to read about, and the kind she tries to portray in her books.

Even though they're fun stories about sassy women and huge, growly magical men
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