

The book cover features a woman with long dark hair and blue eye makeup, looking over her shoulder. To her right is a close-up of a grey wolf's face with yellow eyes. The background is a mix of blue and purple ethereal smoke and a golden mechanical gear in the bottom left corner.

PLANET
WOLF

SHIFTERS WORLDS SERIES

REBECCA
ROYCE

USA Today Bestselling Author

PLANET WOLF

SHIFTER WORLD

REBECCA ROYCE

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Planet Wolf

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This book is dedicated to my Aunt Phyllis Bergman. I thought you might appreciate how Esther never stops fighting. Love you.

“I’m not crazy,” I hissed at my cousin Patrice, despite being pretty sure I might sound that way. “Not even a little bit.”

In between assuring her of my mental capacity, I stuffed a briefcase with everything I might need to pull it off. “If the Shifters meet with the Union, then we have to know what they’re saying. That way, Doug can either strike another deal with them or brace for the impact of their decisions.” I lost my breath and stopped to catch it before I could continue. “We know they plan to have a full delegation going, and we know half the people don’t know the other half. We’re never going to get another chance like this one.”

My blonde-haired blue-eyed cousin Patrice couldn’t look more opposite from me if we planned it. Currently, the pale light of that hair glimmered as she shook her head. “Esther, for goodness’ sake. I’m not saying it isn’t a good idea. Of course, it is, but it *is* crazy for you to be the one doing it. Have you forgotten how sick you’ve been lately?”

I hadn’t forgotten. How could I forget when I was the one actually living with the illness every single day of my life? “That’s why it *has* to be me.” *Deep breath to reset my system.* “If something happens to me—well, no one expects me to make it much longer anyway.”

Patrice gasped then pulled me into a hug. “Don’t say things like that.”

She likely meant it, since we've been together since we were children. They raised me in her house after they locked my mother away for being a raving lunatic. Well, that wasn't how *they* put it exactly, but ultimately it described her and what they did to deal with her. So, because of Mom being a nutter, I lived with my grandparents in the same house as all of my aunts and uncles. My cousins. The staff...

Why am I thinking about any of this right now?

Is it because it is easier to think about the mundane than what I have to do?

Shoving it all aside, I continued my explanation. "If we're going to get Doug elected and oust the Union, we have to do it now. I'm going to this meeting, end of story. I'll keep to myself on the shuttle. Act busy. Then we'll get there, and I'm just going to listen. That's all."

She put her hands on her hips, and already I could get a glimpse of the mother she would become in roughly three months. "I'm only going to agree to this if you take a tail. We'll send a ship to follow behind you discreetly. If they get any sort of indication that things have gone bad, they can rescue you."

I knew what tail they'd send—my other cousin, Lucas. I had a lot of cousins, but Lucas would be a terrible choice in this case. He couldn't singlehandedly attack a Union ship if things went badly for me. Still, if it would pacify Patrice's worries, then I would do it. "Sure. That works."

Her face lit up. "Great. Don't forget your medicine, and for goodness' sake, don't forget to take your pills."

I wouldn't forget. I never did. They didn't work, but I took them with precise accuracy anyway. Since no one could really diagnose what was wrong with me, no treatment ever proved effective, or not for long. *Story of my life*. Seizures—well, there was medicine for that symptom, at least. Sometimes the medicines worked, sometimes they didn't. Why did I have the seizures in the first place? Well, they had no idea. Why did I have fainting spells? No idea, but there were medicines for that symptom. Same problem—sometimes it worked and

others it didn't. Puking up everything I ate? Huh, no idea, but that was a weird symptom.

Spots on my vision.

Skin itching everywhere.

Symptom after symptom, yet all my scans came back clean—except for some slight anomalies in my bloodwork no one could ever explain, but those shouldn't be a big deal.

Maybe I was making it up? That had been my favorite diagnosis over the years, one which proved total bullshit since my first symptoms started when I was four years old. Despite my mother's issues, I'd always been a very happy kid.

Her illness led the doctors to believe what happened to me had to be at least partially related to some kind of mental illness.

Not that they knew what was wrong with her, either.

"You're obsessing again, aren't you?" Patrice lifted an eyebrow, and I laughed. It was good to have family who understood. Very good, indeed.

Of course, I was lying to her, though. None of my plan would be easy. False identification should get me on the shuttle, but it was possible they'd find me out immediately. My forger came highly recommended, if such a thing were really possible, but we'd just see how it went. Patrice and our other cousins would never think to hire a criminal. They didn't have a devious bone in their bodies, but I did. So did Doug, but since we were trying to get him elected by making him the alternative to the evil Union, it wouldn't do for him to get caught trying to gather information.

Hence me boarding the shuttle to go see what the Union was doing with the shifters.

The letter from Tiffany Keyes burned a hole in my brain. In those terse words, she gave me proof the Union were dirty dogs doing business with canines willing to blow up everyone to get what they wanted. Tiffany lived on Planet Cat now with men she called her mates, but once she'd been a member of the Union, and a pretty high up operative at that. With the

information in her letter, including the names of people who left Planet Bear to start a new life, I could reach them to call for help if we needed it.

After the meeting, I would finally have enough proof to take down the Union, and their demise couldn't come a moment too soon.

I walked slowly to the departure point, knowing Patrice would arrange for me to be followed even as I arrived at the loading zone. Despite nearly having a heart attack getting on the shuttle, the second my ID worked, I became part of the group. Everyone remained almost eerily silent, staring at each other in chilly quiet in the cramped space while pretending not to judge one another.

Based on my experience, the Union employees hated each other. At the very least, they didn't trust each other whatsoever, something our intel had suggested for a long time and confirmed by Tiffany. On the ship, surrounded by employees, I could see it for myself firsthand. The hatred so filled the space, it practically dripped off them, pulsing at the cellular level like a living thing.

We shared bedrooms on the journey, which should've been companionable, yet no one said a word to each other. Naturally, I tended to be a chatty person, but I was happy to keep quiet and leave them alone with their thrumming animosity. Eventually, the chairman exited his huge suite to tell us we'd be divided into groups, each one of us leaving with a different shifter group to complete our various missions or jobs. They handed me a piece of paper, and it simply read *Bears*. I hoped someone would be forthcoming with explanations once they started talking, since currently everyone simply followed directions as if they knew the steps to the dance in advance.

Maybe it was knowing they were doing horrible things to the universe? How did they not realize I wasn't supposed to be there? When I ran programs for the family's charities, I had lists upon lists of carefully gathered intel and information to guide my choices and behaviors: who would be in attendance, what were their likes and dislikes, what were their motives.

But not this time.

Of course, who would dare try to infiltrate the Union? They were the supreme power of everything, meaning missions against them were a waste of time. I rolled my eyes. *Not for much longer*, not if I had anything to do with it.

The captain landed the shuttle, and we were suddenly on Planet Wolf. The gravity made my muscles ache, but I ignored it. Physical pain couldn't compete with the sheer amazement of being on a shifter planet—one of those places in life where regular humans didn't go. I guessed the ship didn't have time to do a gentle introduction into the gravity, so I struggled with the transition. I hadn't traveled much off-planet before, but compared to my previous experiences, our landing was irregular and rough. Some of the other passengers made noises of pain, but not me. I remained silent.

I always hurt. This was just another ache.

After only taking a few moments to disembark the ship, we trudged outside to join an already formed group. Surprisingly, I didn't have to stop to catch my breath when we disembarked or as we walked. Usually, I struggled with pretending everything was fine, which ranked among my least favorite activities in life.

Maybe it was the adrenaline?

The fearless leader for the Union put on a good show for the disembarking passengers. A big smile stretched his face and he kept patting people on the back. I hung toward the rear of our group, watching everyone else as surreptitiously as possible. I didn't know who I was supposed to be, nor did I know what my intended task might be on their mission, so my biggest challenge was pretending not to be terrified. So far, I figured I was pulling it off, since no one stopped what they were doing to point at me and shriek *traitor*.

My heart raced, the weight of what I was doing heavy on my chest, and I tried to ignore it. The sensation wasn't anxiety. It was just what my heart did on occasion, so I tried to disregard it and focus on my surroundings.

Were they going to talk soon? They had to, so I could slip away unnoticed quickly. The smell of jasmine filled the air, distracting me from my thoughts. I lifted my nose to catch more of it, one of my favorite scents teasing on the breeze. My mom always loved it as well, I remembered suddenly. When I visited her—one of the few times I visited before she forgot who we were—I brought her jasmine oil. She liked it in her bath, and my gift proved one of the few luxuries afforded her for the time when she lived there.

The memory struck me as so pleasant. Did their whole planet smell of jasmine?

The clearing where we landed huddled damp in the dim light, surrounded by thick and old growth forest. Trees I would have called pine on Earth obstructed the view outside the circular area where the ship landed. In the distance, snow covered mountains carved a stark line across the horizon. Other than that, nothing but trees seemed to stretch everywhere I looked, as if the forest cloaked the area in a pine curtain to hide it away.

Were they called pines on Planet Wolf? I didn't know.

One of the men seemed to think he was my boss, and I watched as he schmoozed a group of other shifters. He was a small man, and he wasn't the only leader among the people I could see. Three groups of three, each led by a male, with all of the men giving each other a wide berth. Although other women were present, none stood in leadership positions so far as I could see.

From what little I learned from our informant prior to the meeting, we would meet with representatives from all of the shifter planets. The idea of Bear, Lion, and Wolf shifters all agreeing to meet in the same place at the same time—I would be lying if I didn't admit the idea struck me as amazing. Of course, there were a lot of things about shifters that baffled me, including their bodies. Just... the change... *wow*. My body couldn't even function properly if I slept the wrong way, yet theirs could alter shape. Did they have more than one soul? Not that anyone lined up to answer all my questions.

That was when I felt them—the eyes on me. I lifted my gaze, searching for the source of the sensation. Three men caught my eye, each wearing dark clothing. One of them wore a t-shirt, while the other two sported more formal collared shirts, yet they *all* stared at me. The one in the center tilted his head, his eyes meeting mine.

Why were they looking at me, anyway? Certainly they could look at any number of more interesting and more important people than little old me, right? I looked over my shoulder, verifying my safety. Was someone behind me? No. All clear, but that also meant I was for sure what caught their rapt attention.

Gosh, do they know I'm not supposed to be here?

“Shall we get started?” the Union rep said.

Finally. I turned to listen as he continued. “We’re here today to cement a peace treaty. One where we all will get what we want...”

I don’t know what he planned to say next. One second, he was talking. The next, an explosion so loud it deafened me shook the area a second before my whole body jolted. A sensation like someone had punched me hard in the chest propelled me backward. Everyone was hit by it, the force leaving nothing untouched. Everyone and everything was flying. Trees. Rocks.

I didn’t have time for fear, no time to even call out.

Then there was nothing.



I WOKE to the feeling of something heavy being wrenched off my body. My ears rang. I couldn’t... couldn’t understand what was happening. I blinked my eyes open, struggling to focus. Three men stood in front of me, their faces familiar, but I couldn’t quite...

Oh, that was right. I snuck aboard a ship. *The meetings. Shifters. Explosion.* What had happened?

I tried to sit up and one of them bent over, saying something to me. I couldn't hear him over the ringing, but he placed a hand on my shoulder. Okay, he didn't want me to move.

All right. I'd stay right there. In fact, maybe I would just close my eyes and go right back to sleep.

The hand on my shoulder again stopped me with a gentle shake. Smoke filled the clearing, filled everything. It burned my eyes and my throat. Coughing really sucked. I hated doing it, and then I thought, *what a ridiculous thought*. Who liked to cough? No one.

One of the other men—not the one who shook me before—picked me up. Being cradled in his arms was nice despite the circumstances. *Damn, I must have a head injury*. My thoughts tumbled around crazily in my head, like marbles set loose in a jar. The man who'd shook me touched my forehead, then the third man, the one who hadn't interacted with me yet, touched my cheek.

That was a lot of touching, now that I thought about it.

Why were they doing that? "I'm always a little bit sick," I tried to explain to them, thinking maybe they just didn't understand. In fact, where was my bag? I tried to look and gave up as weakness overwhelmed me. There were trees everywhere, green and stretching tall as if someone clicked copy and paste a few too many times. And dead bodies. There were dead bodies! Everywhere. Strewn body parts. Were there other survivors or were just the four of us still alive?

What was happening? "I don't understand."

The one who'd shaken me before grabbed his ear. He pounded on it for a second and then made a face. My ears were still ringing, so I couldn't understand what he said or even really hear sounds.

I only realized that the man holding me was running after he'd been doing it for a bit. This was too much. Just too much.

I closed my eyes.

The next time I opened them, I wasn't confused. I knew where I was—on Planet Wolf. A cool breeze struck my face, lifting strands of my hair as I considered my circumstances. I was with three strangers, but for some reason, I wasn't dead. *Yet*. Why wasn't I dead? Had there been a tree on me?

One of the men—it was hard for me to keep them straight—squatted in front of me. He stretched out an arm, then placed his hand on my side and smiled. He said something, his lips moving in a way that implied speech, but I couldn't understand him. Not one word. It sounded like mixed words—clicks, noises. Nothing that resembled language came from his lips, and I struggled to make sense of things.

“I... I don't know what you're saying. Something is wrong with me.”

The man pointed at his ear and then shook his head. I stared at him as it dawned on me. The explosion knocked out my translator, so I couldn't hear him in my language. Although they worked like magic, I usually didn't give mine much thought since it just stayed in my ear all of the time. Scientists had solved the problem of communicating across language barriers between countries and even worlds, and their methods kept things seamless, allowing us to see people speaking while understanding their words. Well, ninety-nine percent of the time, it worked like magic. Some things didn't ever translate or remained slightly off, meaning the listener needed to use context clues to figure out connotation. Even so, everywhere we went in the universe, people were able to communicate easily.

Yet without a translator, I survived the explosion without any way to communicate with my saviors. Assuming they were saviors, of course, and not kidnappers. Who were they? What kind of shifters were they? What was happening? “Can you understand me? Is it just me who is broken?”

He stared at me, no recognition in his gaze. My companion looked over his shoulder. How bad did I look after surviving an explosion? The one who sat with me rose and said something to the other two men. They all started making the

noise I couldn't decipher—obviously some kind of conversation—and then stared at me.

Okay, I had to move, to do something. I couldn't lie there prone forever. I pulled myself to a sitting position, and all three of them jolted, their hands suddenly on me as they urged me to do... what? To stay where I was? *No, sorry, boys, that isn't happening.*

I got up. I was wobbly but up. *Fuck. Just fuck. Fuck a duck. No, that's not nice to say about the duck. Ooph.*

I wasn't okay.

I limped forward. I had to think. My cousin was up there in space, circling somewhere. He would hear that something exploded, and then he would come get me. Great. Help would be coming. That was good news.

Right then, as I forced positivity into my tired brain, it started to rain. Hard. Cold and miserable rain pattered down with wet splats, instantly soaking and chilling me to the bone. Shock made me squeal, the chill awakening pains from the explosion I didn't realize I'd even gained. I rushed back under the tree I'd just left in time to see the man who cared for me shift into a Wolf form. The one to the left, the one wearing the t-shirt, also transformed. Their clothes went flying, and when they did, my mouth fell open.

Well, that just happened. They'd shifted and it had been really, *really* cool.

The man in the middle didn't shift. Instead, he looked up at the rain, letting it hit him in the face. A large gash crossed his forehead, and his clothes were torn. After a second, he dropped his gaze and walked toward me, gravel crunching with his every step.

I swallowed. Something about him struck me as very intense, a ripple of sheer power thrumming through his every motion. His movements were smooth, like he always knew exactly how he wanted to present himself, like a predator on the hunt. I backed up as he stalked toward me, my steps not nearly as confident or sure. When a big strong man whose

intentions I couldn't fathom charged toward me, my natural instinct was to back the heck up. Fight or flight? *Flight, please.*

I hit the tree. He pressed against me, forcing me up against the bark. His hands flattened on either side of my head, essentially trapping me against his body. The two other Wolves pressed on either side of me as I caught my breath. Thunder boomed through the sky as lightning strobed, and the temperature dropped ten degrees in what felt like seconds. I was wet, the spatter of raindrops making me blink fast to try to see past the downpour. Even under the tree, I couldn't keep the water from hitting me and sluicing down my face in tiny rivers. It would have been worse if they hadn't caged me in, taking the brunt of the water and keeping me warm with their bodies.

They were protecting me, I realized abruptly. I blinked. Yes, that was what they were doing.

That was really... decent of them?

It had been five months since I had a seizure. Two months since I'd fainted, but all my other symptoms were still alive and present. If I could just keep it like this, I could survive until I got help. *I could do this.* These men were being really kind to me so far, despite my inability to communicate with them. They could have just left me there to burn to death after the explosion, since I never would have woken up.

The one still in his human form stared at me, the strobes illuminating the nearness of his face. His dark eyes were deep, penetrating, and his gaze called to me, asking me not to break eye contact with him despite the intimacy of our positions. One of the Wolves—the one who had worn the t-shirt—bumped my leg. *This is okay.* It was... It was...

A deluge of water fell from the sky, slicking my hair and running into my eyes. *No, this isn't going to work out.* We were all going to die, to drown standing there. People couldn't survive so much water falling at once. The man who blocked me in, the one with the gash on his forehead, hugged me against him. I hugged him back. If we were all going to die,

then we should go out in an embrace. *What a wonderful way to go.* Better than in the hospital, which was where I'd expected to die.

No sooner than the water started, it stopped once more. The hugger let me go, and the Wolves shifted back into their human forms. The noises I couldn't understand started again, so I took a deep breath.

And realized they were naked. The ones who'd shifted stood around me, very naked and very human looking.

"Ooh, you're naked," I said, stating the obvious before I dramatically covered my eyes with my hand. If I could have evaporated or burst into spontaneous combustion in that moment, I would've been very okay with the outcome.

A few seconds later, one of them tapped my arm, so I peeked out from under my hand. The guys wore pants, despite that leaving their chests gleaming and perfect. *Well, that's something, at least.* Where had they gotten the pants? Then I spotted their bag. The one who'd been with me when I awoke carried it slung over his shoulder, and I wondered what it contained.

He nodded toward the mountains and then at me. Finally, he pointed. They wanted to go to the snowy mountains? Were they out of their minds?

I shook my head in what I hoped was the universal sign for *no*. I wasn't going there. I was staying here because I wasn't crazy. Someone would come for me, and my chances were better on my own than in those mountains.

Next to me, the one who had worn a t-shirt, put his hands together and then expanded them. He did it twice before I understood what he meant. *Damn.* He was afraid something else would blow up. Could my cousin find me if I went with them to the mountains?

Okay, I could figure it out. When I got somewhere with some kind of communication device, I could reach out to him and he'd come for me. I didn't need to panic. There had to be a

town somewhere. Yes, they were right—we should get out of there and go to those mountains.

I nodded, not sure if he'd understand my agreement or not. He extended the hands he used to demonstrate with and after a few long seconds of confusion, I realized he wanted me to take them. They really made nice men on Planet Wolf, I had to give them that. Very helpful. I linked our fingers together and let him lead me away from my tree.

We walked in silence, heading in the general direction of the mountains. I didn't know if they were naturally not big talkers or if they remained silent to be polite to me. Instead of being comforted by the idea they might be silent for my sake, it made me feel even more awkward because I couldn't understand.

I'd gotten wet despite their help, so it wasn't long until I shivered. The one walking to my left side-eyed me as the first shudder wracked my body then he said something to the others. He touched my forehead while the hugger pulled his shirt off. What was he doing? He used the fabric to wipe my face as if he intended to dry me off. The notion might be sweet, but he was arguably wetter than even I was.

“No. Thank you.” I stopped him, stilling his hands with my own. “I'm okay. I don't need that,” I added, although I was pretty sure they couldn't understand me.

I needed my bag with my medicine. I chewed on my lip. Was it possible it made it through the explosion? Could the rain have put out the fire? I stopped walking. How could I explain to them what I wanted?

Tugging my hand free from the guy, I then pantomimed the explosion. I used the same gestures he had, so it only took a few seconds for all three of them to nod. *Okay, good.* I touched the bag hanging over the shoulder of the third companion then I touched my chest.

“I need my bag. It's at the explosion site. Did it make it? Could we check?”

After a definitive negative shake, the hugger pointed at the mountain again. I sighed. Although our broken form of communication worked so far, it would get old really quickly. Not that I had a choice. If I didn't have my pills, without any step-down process, at some point I would have a reaction to the withdrawals.

But maybe we could make it to the mountains before that happened?

I nodded, failing to come up with any other plans. I guessed we were going for a walk. A long one.

My family always teased me, but I took pride in my almost innate ability to make the best out of situations. I held onto the idea that I had a purpose—to help my family get rid of the Union and reset Earth to some kind of democracy. If I could do it, maybe people wouldn't still be dying from poverty that should have been eliminated a long time ago. We had the ability to take care of our people. Other planets were doing it, and the math proved there was no reason we couldn't.

But the Union was toxic, greedy, and it had to be eradicated.

I needed to focus on my purpose as we made our long trek. I'd just remind myself what I was supposed to do, and be happy I made it.

I'd lived to help another day.

Behind us, something boomed. I jumped. Another explosion? The men also stopped to look back, casting glances my way as if to see if I understood. They'd been right. We couldn't stay there. It wasn't safe.

"I wish I knew who you all were, and that I could tell you who I was," I said, despite the language barrier.

Hugger put his arm around me, and the hand holder took my hand. They wanted to keep moving. Somehow, some way, I'd keep up.

We walked and walked. Uphill and downhill. Over rough terrain, under trees I hoped wouldn't fall on us. Bugs buzzed and the air smelled of living things. When I had to pee, they let

me, giving me privacy. The one who was there when I woke up brought me some berries. I stared at them, wondering if they'd be safe for me. It was a new planet, and I had all sorts of food complications. The last thing I needed while taking an unexpected hike through the forests toward a mountain was to start puking.

My stomach growled. I couldn't remember the last time I'd eaten. On the shuttle? That seemed right. I'd had some very bland toast, but plain foods were usually better for me.

"I never introduced myself." I smiled at my helpers. "Thank you for bringing me the berries. I hope I can eat them. Don't be upset if I can't. I'm not a *well* person. I'm grateful for all you're doing for me. My name is Esther Espenson and I have to come up with something to call each of you. I know you can't understand a word I'm saying, but it helps to say something, doesn't it?" I put the berries in my mouth and chewed. They were sweet... similar to raspberries back home, so I swallowed them. Delicious.

Wonderful, really.

Until my stomach turned. Yep. I was... not going to be able to eat these. I pushed away from the men and ran to the nearest spot where I could hide. Puking was awful, particularly with an audience.

I retched for half an hour, which seemed unfairly long considering the only thing I ate was a mouthful of berries.

Then again, maybe my body also rejected me skipping my afternoon pills and being nearly blown up.

The one who had been there when I woke up—with light brown eyes, nearly the color of amber—stayed next to me while I was miserable, despite my continued efforts to push him away. He held my dark hair in his large hand and petted my back gently while I threw up. He witnessed it all. I was pretty sure the other two yelled at him for helping me, but who knew the specifics of their communication. I didn't know for sure, unable to gauge meaning or tone from their noises. Maybe they just spoke louder in their language for other reasons than anger, but they certainly gestured at him a lot.

Finally, the gagging ceased, and I could breathe again, if only unsteadily. “Sorry,” I told them, even though they couldn't understand me. “I'm just really unique. Sometimes I can't eat what other people can eat. On my planet, we have something called bananas. I can't eat them. Can you believe that? I mean... who can't eat bananas?”

I rose and the hugger put his arm around me. He was the tallest out of the men, and the other two seemed to answer to him as if he were in charge in some way. He led me to a nearby campfire—when did they have time to set up a camp? And where was the hand holder? As if I'd conjured him by thinking about him, he appeared from the trees. He held a dead animal and, again, he'd lost all clothing. I looked down fast,

heat lighting up my cheeks like a banner. *Damn it.* Every time they shifted, they ended up nude, so I was going to have to get over myself. Clearly, they didn't have the same hang-ups about nakedness as I was used to.

If I were smart, I'd remember it was another example of me needing to travel more. I should leave Earth more than occasionally and learn new things. Of course, I'd been dying my whole life, so it wasn't like I had a ton of opportunities to travel. No one wanted to let the girl who was about to expire off-planet. After all, what if she got hurt? But at twenty-two, it was a lot harder to stop me from doing things just because they might be risky. I made it to Mars and to Planet Wolf. I'd make it to Venus next. I decided to add the goal to my mental list; I liked to meet my goals.

Of course, my goals are how I landed in this mess.

And it was a mess.

The naked hand holder set down the dead animal and then changed again. Thank goodness they had that bag. What would happen if they ran out of clothes? They'd probably have to shift and stay that way until we reached our destination. It was too cold to walk around totally naked, but then what would happen to me?

A thought dawned on me while I was puking—these guys had been at a meeting with the Union. They might not realize it, but we were coming at this thing from the opposite sides. They were, in some way, aligned with the Union. Did that make them my enemy? Maybe they were only being nice to me because they thought I was Union, too. What would happen when they found out I wasn't?

The now-not-naked provider of what I could only assume was dinner gestured for me to sit next to him on the ground. I was pretty sure I stank. There was no toothpaste here for me to do anything about the puke smell on my breath. Really, it was gross. *Hands down yuckiness.*

But I sat where he indicated, because I had more important things to worry about than whether or not I smelled bad to these guys. The tallest of them, the one who seemed to be in

charge, started tearing at the dead animal like he was getting it ready to cook. I forced myself to look away. I'd never seen food go from alive to dinner. Yes, I'd been spoiled my whole life. Even with my mother out of her mind, I had everything I needed and then some.

I wanted that opportunity for everyone.

The chance to live better.

Not a small order to accomplish before I died. *Get Doug into office.* I could do it. Then there would be a purpose to all of it, and to my having existed at all.

If I could just get out of this mess, maybe I could still accomplish the goal I'd been working on for the last six years.

The one with the lightest eyes had to be a doctor of some kind, based on his interest in my well-being. He took my hand in his and I could tell he used his fingertips to check my pulse. Yeah, confirmed—medical profession, that much I knew. Since I didn't know his name, I'd think of him as the doctor. The one cooking was the leader. Which made the one who killed dinner... the hunter? It would have to work for the moment. At least it gave me some way to differentiate them, making it easier on my poor, tired brain.

But what else about them kept them together? Were they brothers? Friends? Work colleagues?

The doctor frowned. He likely noticed my pulse was too high, since it always beat that way. The leader went about his business, disregarding the doctor's quiet examination. Instead, he used sticks and an impressive amount of strength to cook the food. I hoped they didn't try to feed me again. I was sure the sizzling meat would be tasty, but... I just puked up berries. It was probably better if I didn't try to eat anything else until we got to the mountains.

Exactly how long would that take?

Doctor said something. Then Hunter answered him, followed fast by Leader. None of them were smiling, and then they all turned to regard me. I sighed. You didn't spend as

much time as I did in hospitals without getting a sixth sense about when someone was discussing your health.

“I was born like this,” I explained with a shrug.

They all continued to look at me as Hunter put his hand on my back and rubbed gentle circles. Well... that was very nice, too. I wondered if they intended to walk all night. Were we taking a short rest before proceeding?

The group went quiet after that. Doctor scooted closer to me, which was nice, because despite the fire, the temperature had dropped again. Eventually, Leader grinned. I had no idea why, but something made him smile. His gaze met mine, and my heart stuttered. Usually, the reaction would make me upset, but this time, the flutter actually felt nice.

It wasn't like I'd known them long enough to guess at their characters, nor did I think that our broken communication clued me into them enough to make a judgment, but I still didn't think Leader smiled very often. It was nice to see his lips curl in amusement, even if I didn't know the target at the moment.

He took one of the small pieces of cooked meat and extended it to me, clearly offering sustenance. I stared at it, panic closing my throat. *Oh no*. He really did expect me to eat. I shook my head, hoping to make him understand somehow. “No, thank you. Seriously. So nice of you, but I was just throwing up. I don't want to risk doing that again.”

Leader tried again, and Hunter nodded his head like he wanted me to try. I turned to Doctor. He at least had to understand me. I didn't want to puke, but how did I explain nausea to them? Instead of understanding, he rubbed my knee. I sighed. It seemed very important to them that I eat something. Okay. I accepted the offered food from his hand and took the smallest bite of the already small morsel.

Actually, it was delicious. My stomach rumbled as the first bite burst flavor across my taste buds. Despite my desire to gobble it down, I waited for it to come back up. Food always seemed to come back up, but the protein appeared to actually settle my stomach a bit. *How did that work?* I took another

bite, finding it granted the same effect. By the time I'd eaten the whole piece he offered me, I felt... considerably better. My whole body seemed to sigh in relief, which was extra bizarre since eating usually proved such a chore.

Leader nodded, as if he fully expected the food to stay down, and Hunter grinned. They all started taking pieces, and before I knew it, I was the fullest I had been in years. It was the kind of full that made me want to lie back and just do nothing until the feeling passed. I yawned then jolted, remembering the explosion as soon as I closed my eyes. It wasn't exactly the kind of situation where I could catch a quick power nap to regain my strength.

They were strangers, and male strangers at that. So far, they'd proved to be nice strangers who saved my life, but they remained strangers all the same. I guessed I *could* trust them, just based on our interactions so far. It was weird... the men acted as if they knew me somehow, or I was familiar to them. I couldn't explain why I felt that way, but it was something in how they looked at me and how easily they reached for my hand. Despite a complete lack of ability to speak to them or understand what they said, I couldn't shake the sense of familiarity when I watched the men moving around me.

Hunter tugged me against him, and I startled, not expecting the physical contact. I stiffened, trying to make sense of what he was doing—despite me just thinking such nice things about him—when I realized he *hugged* me. Yes, that was what he was doing. He was hugging me against his large, hot body. Doctor slid into the space on my other side and hugged me as well. In moments, their embrace leaned me backward. I might have screamed if I hadn't caught Leader's gaze. He wasn't worried about their unexpected contact. There was something about him, about the serenity of his gaze. If he was calm, then I would be, too, even though the thought didn't make a lick of sense.

My huggers were shirtless, yet they were so much warmer than me. Their skin felt smooth and hot under my fingertips. "Um. Thank you. I guess. I shouldn't really be as okay with this as I seem to be. Maybe I have a head injury?"

Leader took a seat near us, then he lay back and stared up at the sky. He said something, and the other two laughed, tucking me in more comfortably against them. I could feel their amusement, see it in the curve of their lips. Laughing was the same on Planet Wolf as it was on Earth, and the realization struck me as being really nice. Comforting, too, that things were still the same, despite me being so very far from home.

“I’m sorry about how I stink,” I said, remembering again some of what I had endured so far. I hoped they weren’t laughing because of how badly I reeked. My jaw popped in another yawn. The ground was hard, but I barely seemed to notice it. The sky above hung like black velvet punctured by more stars than I’d ever seen before. They twinkled above me, but even the stars weren’t where I expected them to be.

I caught my breath. It was beautiful. So beautiful. Breathtaking, a different sky than the one I’d looked at my whole life. My friends and family couldn’t see the stars I looked at in that moment, which struck me as wild and wonderful and scary all at the same time. I was, for the first time ever, completely cut off from them.

Tears slipped from my eyes. Was it the realization? The explosion? The...

Doctor rolled onto his stomach, considering me for a moment. Then, with the pad of his thumb, he wiped away my tears. Hunter held me tighter while Leader scooted closer to all of us. After a long moment, he sat up and placed a comforting hand on my leg. I sucked in my tears and forced myself to stop blubbering. I wasn’t going to make the situation harder on everyone by becoming hysterical. Things would go wrong soon enough. Well, *more* wrong. They always did. In the great grand course of things, I was having an incredibly nice moment, when it came down to it. Camping with three very good-looking men? I snorted, snuggling closer before I explored the thought further.

I hardly allowed myself to think about how good looking they were, but the men each carried a striking handsomeness. All three of them were dark haired, dark eyed, and dreamy—basically, they were out of my league as I’d never been very

popular on Earth in the dating circles. Even being from my family hadn't really helped me, despite our history. Most of the people I encountered knew my mother's story—how she went off on an adventure and came back crazy and pregnant with me. She insisted she was hearing things, and then I'd been sick, which hadn't helped anything.

In a family of statuesque, tall blondes, I was small, dark haired, olive skinned, and different. Which was fine, since not one of them ever made me feel out of place or anything but gorgeous. Still, I knew I didn't fit in, which was the part that mattered. I knew I wasn't like them, and it made it hard sometimes to resist wanting to run away to someplace where I fit better.

Maybe if I hadn't been so sick, I would've left sooner.

Why am I thinking about it now? Doctor rolled over again and went back to hugging me. The fire gave us some light, enough for me to see Hunter closing his eyes. He was going to sleep, and there was trust in that. Never were we more vulnerable than when we were out cold. Their ability to rest either meant that I offered them no threat whatsoever—the most likely possibility—or he just trusted me specifically already.

I liked that second one.

Behind me, Doctor's breathing changed. It seemed he was going to knock off, too. My gaze met Leader's. He watched me, his eyes glittering in the darkness, his earlier smiles gone. After a second, he winked at me. He was staying up. I finally understood. He was the lookout.

Maybe the idea of him watching over us was reassuring, or maybe it was finally the body heat that did me in, but my lids drifted closed. It had been a strange, hard day—definitely the time to put the end to it.



I WOKE up stiff and cold. Lifting my head took some effort. I recognized the stiffness, knew it meant it was going to be one

of *those* days. The painful ones. I was absolutely not in a position to grab a heating pad, work from bed, and not worry about it.

Or pretend not to, since chronic pain had the annoying tendency to be chronic.

Forcing myself to sit up, I looked around. Doctor messed with the fire nearby, but the others were missing. He turned as if he felt my gaze and a smile lit his face. I grinned back before I could overthink it. Something about Doctor made it hard not to smile back at him. There was something naturally joyful about him.

He rose, moved to my side, and placed a hand on top of my head.

Then he frowned. Oh no, he'd clued into my pain somehow, I just knew it. How did he know? They were Wolf shifters. Were there things they could just smell?

Doctor shook his head then said something I couldn't understand. His frustration came across loud and clear, no language needed, and I couldn't help but sympathize as I'd love to ask him some questions, too.

Because I wanted to seem tough, I pulled myself upright. To his credit, the doctor didn't try to help me. He let me do it alone. Maybe he understood I was the kind of person who needed to do things for myself, or maybe he just wasn't very helpful. Despite my frustrations, I had to admit I figured it was the former.

Leader appeared from a break in the forest. His chest gleamed shirtless, which meant that he'd shifted and changed while I'd been asleep. He said something, and Doctor responded, but neither of them smiled. They were serious. *So* serious.

"Where is Hunter?" I asked as I looked around. "Your friend who holds hands and brings dinner?"

They didn't understand me, and a second later, it didn't matter anyway. Above our heads, very large birds began making a huge commotion. I gasped. Truly, they were the

biggest birds I'd ever seen, the size of shuttle crafts. I backed up and would have fallen over, but Doctor grabbed me.

Yes... he was helpful.

And then we were running. Doctor dragged me back toward the woods, out of the clearing and into the safety of the trees. Okay, so the birds were dangerous? I was getting that. So why wasn't Leader running?

Oh, of course. Because he was going to shift. One second, he was the man who had been our lookout and the next he was a big, gray Wolf. Another Wolf charged into the clearing; it had to be Hunter, but in the form of a black Wolf. I hadn't noted any of the colors of their fur or anything much distinguishing the day before.

Hadn't been able to process it at all.

Too much.

But this is real. It is happening.

I jolted and Doctor held me closer. His eyes looked canine somehow, as if they weren't quite human anymore. "Are you going to shift, too?"

Leader charged one of the birds, his narrow chest and strong legs propelling him into motion. He leapt in the air, taking the first one down as Hunter did the same as if synchronized. I caught my breath. Even as the winged creatures attacked them, they took them down one after the other like it was nothing. I knew those huge claws on the birds—talons, I was pretty sure they were called—meant they were brutal and dangerous. Minutes passed, and the flock disappeared, vanishing back to the sky as quickly as they'd appeared.

The Wolves jumped down and shifted the second they hit the ground. With grins on their faces, they patted each other on the back and laughed. I somehow managed not to look down from their faces to the nakedness elsewhere on their bodies. Doctor took my hand and walked with me toward them.

He grinned, and I couldn't help but think it reminded me of the way my cousins recounted sporting events at home.

Sure, the sports there involved balls and in this case six dead birds, but these men were also Wolves.

What stories I would have to tell when I got home.

I still didn't understand the bird attack in the first place, if I was being honest. Were they just aggressive birds? What would we do, since they defeated them? I pointed at the birds and then pantomimed eating them. Were they edible? Hunter made a face and shook his head while Doctor pretended to hit the ground like he'd died. I guessed the birds were poisonous—or at the very least, they would taste really, really bad.

In fact, when I almost stepped on one of the talons, Doctor hauled me into his arms so I wouldn't. The two currently naked men—wow, I was just going to have to adjust—clothed their bottom halves and we set out to walk again. Eventually, Doctor let me walk for myself, and I tried not to grumble about being hauled around. It was a warmer day, and I had slept really well considering things.

Leader put his arm around me and passed me some leftovers from the night before. It was still delicious even though it was cold. Actually, I could eat their food every day, all day, for the rest of my life if someone wanted to package some up for me.

When I had to pee, we stopped, and after an embarrassing game of explaining with gestures, I hid to relieve myself. The whole act made me grin. *Look at me, Esther, the outdoor person.* I would've never thought it possible.

My hair was a mess, and my clothes stank from the explosion and the bodily fluids I'd expelled. But I was happy. It was strange to realize that. Could I remember, really, the last time I had been truly happy?

Why did I suddenly feel joyful on a strange shifter planet with three strangers in a place where I could get into serious trouble if I was caught by the wrong people? Maybe it was that, for the first time in forever, I was really alive.

Not just waiting to die.

Hunter turned around with a smile on his face. He stopped and touched the tree then he said something. I couldn't understand any of the syllables, nor make any kind of sense of it. Even some of the sounds, I wasn't sure I heard them right.

Then he pointed at me. I stared back at him. What did he want me to do with the tree?

He made his strange sounds again, and at least I could make out that they were the same noises. Then he touched the tree again and pointed at me.

Oh! Like a light turning on, I finally understood him. He wanted me to say the word. "Tree."

Next to me, Leader smiled, and behind me, Doctor clapped his hands. *Oh, they liked that. Sure.* It was a little bit like talking. Like, we were actually verbally communicating with one another for the first time and not just flailing. Hunter pointed to the tree, and then he tried it. "T..." I couldn't make out what came after the t sound, but he'd gotten that right.

I grinned at him. "Closer than I would get."

He pointed at the ground. This time it was an R sound. Sort of like Ruff. I tried repeating it, and then braced for his laughter, but Leader just nodded and tugged me closer while Hunter's grin increased. He did it again, this time indicating he wanted me to do it.

"Ground." I hoped that was the right word. They could have meant they wanted me to say *dirt*. But I was going with *ground*. Why not? I didn't think there was going to be a test when we were done. It would probably be easier if there *were* a test, since I did great at tests. My body often failed me but never my brain.

Hunter tried to say it. The sound he made wasn't as clear, but he nearly got the first letter right. Doctor was closer, Leader, not at all.

Hunter put his hands on his chest. "C..." I definitely heard the *c* letter in there. Of course, it could have been a *k*, but it was that sound, the hard *cah* sound that made those noises. That was really exciting. That was his name, unless he was

saying *chest*. There was only one way to know. I pointed at Leader.

He lifted an eyebrow before he touched his chest the way Hunter had done. This time it was a *J* sound, like *jay*, before I couldn't understand the rest of it. Okay. They were telling me their names. Now, it was my turn to grin. I spun around and Doctor put his hand on his chest. It was an *ahh* sound. So I had *C*, *J*, and *A*. That was great, in some ways easier than thinking Tall One or Doctor. There was at least a sound to go with those names.

Hunter pointed at me. Yes, they wanted my name. "Esther."

He furrowed his brow. It had to be hard to say and hear. The *sth* sounds together would be confusing, hard for the ear. I said it again. "Esther."

It was okay if they didn't get it. Finally, it was Leader—J—who spoke. "Est." He got that part, and I nodded. It was so close. We were one step further along in this strange trip we were taking together.

That was, of course, when the snow started.

I gasped. It had felt warmer, but it was like the snow brought the cold with it. Rain had been hard enough, but snow seemed brutally unfair. I shivered. I should have known; the day was going too well. The universe was all about balance, so it made sense that I was due for bad.

I wasn't going to make it to the mountain. Leader shouted out something to the other two, and Hunter ran ahead of us toward wherever they were going. Doctor's face told me I was right—that this was very bad. For just a second, I saw pure dread cross his gaze before he hid it. I recognized it, since I saw the expression on the faces of medical professionals a lot. Sure, they'd tell you to be hopeful, but there was usually that one moment before they hid from you what they really thought behind their training and distance.

Snow could be fatal, especially if you were exposed and without any kind of shelter—particularly if you weren't

dressed for it, and you weren't prepared.

Leader handed me the bag with their extra pants. I nodded. Sure, I'd carry it for a little while. He stepped back, shifting into the beautiful gray Wolf I'd come to recognize as him, and ran off in the direction where Hunter had vanished.

They could shift into Wolves to be fur covered and warm, but I had no Wolf of my own. All three of them could make themselves warmer, but I only had my human skin.

Doctor put out his hand, and I took it. His name started with A, that was something else to think about. His skin was warm to the touch when he drew me toward his bare chest. They must run hotter than I did, just as a rule.

So, of course—*because why not make everything harder?*
—I fainted.

I didn't even get the warning I sometimes got before it happened. My hands didn't tingle. Everything just went black.

I woke up warm and curled up on Doctor's lap. No snow fell around us, but it took me a minute to register that we had to be in some kind of cave. A small fire burned in the corner, the smoke being sucked upward by a natural vent on the ceiling. I didn't see the other two Wolves. Doctor lay close enough to the fire against the cave wall to feel the heat, and he had his eyes closed. The gentle, rhythmic sounds of his breaths came and went, warring with the sounds of the wind outside.

It was some kind of storm, but I'd bet they hadn't known it was coming any more than I did, since they also seemed like it had caught them unaware. I lifted my hand to rub my eyes only to discover it shook. Yep, I'd made it to full-on withdrawal from at least one of my meds. Which one? I had no idea. It really could have been any of them, but it was a fast withdrawal, so that meant probably the one for my seizures. They warned me we would have to step that down, if I ever wanted to cease taking it.

Doctor caught my hand in his, his eyes open, alert, and on me.

"Hi," I whispered. "Sorry you're stuck with me. Did your other friends leave? Shift and head onto the mountain without you? Did they leave you here to deal with the human who keeps getting sick?"

He frowned and helped me to sit up. My shaking hands couldn't be lost on him, or the way I was sweating, even though I was also freezing. Taking my hands in his, he held

them steady and warm. Then, he brought them to his mouth where he kissed them, gently, twice.

I caught my breath. That was surprising. And lovely.

Doctor A placed my hands over his heart. Finally, he let them go. What did he want? Confusion warred with the natural sense of being squirmy and off that came with having fainted. He wanted to know what was happening to me. How did I know that? I didn't have the slightest clue. Just that, in that moment, even though we couldn't speak the same language, I could hear him. He wanted me to somehow, please, tell him.

I pinched my fingers together and then opened them until they were the size of a pill. Then, in my best mime impersonation, I showed him how I'd swallow a pill. I hoped maybe he'd understand what I was indicating.

He blinked rapidly and then nodded. Okay, he'd understood. Maybe? Hopefully. He drew me to him, and I put my head on his shoulder.

Then he started talking. I'd have given anything to understand him. Where I came from, people were not as naturally affectionate as these men seemed to be. There was another trouble to this withdrawal—if I really had none of the medicine left, I might very well have a seizure. Fainting was one thing—I hated it—but seizing was the absolute worst. Doctor hadn't left me. If his friends really had moved toward safety and left us behind, then how long until he gave up on me and joined them?

Tears swam in my eyes. Was it possible I would die alone in this cave, on a strange planet in a snowstorm? Why had I lived through the explosion to simply perish here?

He made a sound similar to a tut-tut and kissed my hand again. I met his gaze. Maybe I was seeing what I wanted to see, but I would've sworn right then that he wouldn't leave me. This person—who was both man and beast—would stay right by my side.

A noise caught my attention as Hunter came into view. He dragged behind him a dead animal that looked pretty similar to

a pig. Last night, I hadn't been able to identify what they'd brought me to eat, but I was pretty sure it would be similar to pork. My heart sped up, and it took me a second to realize why. I was very glad to see he hadn't left us after all.

Doctor said something to him, and Hunter dropped the pig near the fire before coming over to me. He bent over and cupped my cheek. For one second, he held my gaze before he ran his hand through my hair.

Leader appeared right after that. He brought plants and a bucket that he filled up with snow. He placed it next to the fire, and it dawned on me that he was trying to make water we could drink. When was the last time I drank anything? It hadn't occurred to me that I was thirsty, but sometimes I did lose track of my basic needs.

Like Hunter, Leader came over and sat near me, checking to make sure I was okay in his slow way, as if in greeting. He still had the plants in his hand, so he passed them to Doctor.

They were all stuck in the cave because of me, I realized with dawning horror. If not for me, they'd probably be home.

“You know, I don't think in my whole life I've ever helped a stranger like you're helping me. I mean, sure, I *am* trying to help a lot of strangers now. But on an individual basis, no, I haven't before. I don't know how or why you're doing this, either. Maybe all Wolf shifters are *so* nice, but I can tell you've gone above and beyond. I... I will never be able to thank you. Not enough, anyway.”

Leader bent over and put his head in my lap. He curled up next to me and closed his eyes. I blinked. Well... that had been unexpected. In a million years, I wouldn't have foreseen him doing that. Of course, he'd been up all night on guard duty.

Hunter kissed my cheek. I gasped. They shared such easy affection. In my family, we loved each other a lot, but we weren't physically expressive about that affection. Not at all, honestly. Sometimes we hugged, but mostly our affection came in nice smiles at appropriate times. He backed up and went to cook the food while melting the snow to make water as if there wasn't anything strange about the exchange.

Doctor did something with the plants. I wasn't sure what, but they all seemed to have a task and endeavored to fulfill it. It was quiet, barely a noise in the cave. I swallowed, and the sound of it jarred me. Without thinking about it, I ran my hands through Leader's hair in my lap. It was thick, soft, and it didn't feel dirty—surprising, considering how we'd been living. He sighed and snuggled further into my embrace. Minutes later, he lightly snored.

Like last night, I was struck by the trust his ability to rest so near to me proved. Of course, he could probably wake in a second, shift, and take out my eyes in half that time.

A disturbing thought, Esther.

Or not, kind of. It really was horrible to think about someone gouging out your eyes, so I wouldn't. I'd just consider that it was incredibly nice to be there with them. After all, I showed them trust, too, not that I had a choice when I fainted. Still, they took care of me while I was out. I could baby Leader for a while.

Doctor held up a leaf from one of the plants then motioned for me to open my mouth, like he wanted me to eat it.

I shook my head. Didn't he remember the berries? He motioned again. Obviously, he wanted me to try.

I sighed. They'd been right about the meat the night before, so I could give it a small try. Chewing the greenery, I considered it. I noticed it had little taste, a surprisingly bland plant. I didn't think it was going to make me sick, so I ate the whole thing. A sort of mellowness moved through me within minutes, and much of my constant worry fled. I lifted my head to look at Doctor. What had he given me?

He pointed at my hands. They weren't shaking anymore. *Oh wow.* He was helping with my withdrawal. "That is very nice of you."

Maybe my gratitude translated, because he smiled and nodded. Then he rose and went over to Hunter, presumably to help him.

Time must have moved, but in my blissful state of no pain, I hardly noticed it. I didn't have a thing I had to do except pet Leader. A song came to me, one I'd heard my mother sing when I was very young. She'd been with me until I was four, and every once in a while, a memory would strike me from her. It was the song she hummed to me when she'd put me to bed at night, back when she'd still done that. Before she got lost to whatever took her away from us, whatever stole her mind.

It did feel that way sometimes. Like she used her madness to escape.

Even if it was unfair of me.

I hummed softly. I didn't even know if I knew the words to the half-remembered song, but I knew the sound of it. With the plant Doctor gave me dulling my senses, I didn't have an ounce of self-consciousness in me. *Is it possible to just stay like this forever?* Probably not, but I was going to love it for however long it lasted.

Both of my awake guys stopped what they were doing to stare at me as I started to sing. They looked at each other and then me again. I smiled, shrugging. Did they hate the song? I'd stop.

When I did stop, Hunter rushed over to touch my feet. He patted me until I hummed again. I guessed they liked it. My eyelids got heavy, and I sighed. I'd been unconscious for a while, but maybe it was better to sleep through a day like today.

To not know how uncomfortable it was bound to get.

Leader was still asleep when I woke up. Not sure what woke me, I quickly realized that Doctor was trying to get me to drink some water. I did and then wished I hadn't, but Doctor was insistent. He wanted me to have some. So I drank it from his hand, which was strange. Sort of... intimate. He liked it. Thank goodness they weren't stingy with their smiles, or I wouldn't know how any of them felt.

He gave me some more and then some more. The water woke me up, and although my hands still weren't shaking, I felt clearer than I had when I'd first eaten whatever leaf Doctor had given me.

Hunter appeared with food. Like his friend—brother? colleague?—he fed me from his hand. I only ate a little bit, then I put my hand out to stop him. Unlike the meat from the night before, the not-pig was not making me feel like I could eat forever. It was better to stay a little hungry than risk my stomach turning over.

I really didn't want to puke in the cave, and venturing out into the still-snowing night didn't have a great deal of appeal either.

Amazingly, Leader slept through the exchange. Neither of the two other Wolf shifters were being particularly quiet. Still, he slept deeply, his face pressed into my stomach, small snores reaching my ears.

Hunter took a bite of his own food and then handed some to Doctor, who ate as well. Eventually, Hunter grinned and threw a piece at Doctor. I widened my eyes. Was he having a food fight? Doctor rolled his eyes but threw it back. Then they were both laughing. The sound resonated in the cave like joyful music had joined us. He winked at me a second before he threw it at me, which made Hunter gasp.

I grinned. It almost hit Leader, but I caught it in time. I lifted my eyebrows, and with an aim I'd developed growing up with six male cousins in the same house, I chucked it at Hunter. He mocked falling backward, as if I'd injured him before he lifted himself up on his elbows to outright laugh at me.

Okay, they weren't co-workers unless they were co-workers who were also really good friends. I knew their kind of relationship. They were friends or family, and I wasn't sure why I didn't recognize their bond sooner. A teasing between them said they knew each other very well.

Eventually, it grew quiet again. Hard to tell, since all I could see from the entrance of the cave was falling snow, but I

thought it had gotten late. A seriousness to it becoming late at night, or a weight in the air—the sensation seemed familiar, anyway. Maybe there were dangers they knew about that happened in the dark, or maybe they just worried there were, but none of them tried to leave the cave.

Doctor rose after a time, and he went back to the corner of the cave where he'd stored the plants. He handed me a leaf when he returned, one he obviously wanted me to eat. I took it but hesitated.

“It made me so loopy.” I hummed a little to remind him what happened before.

He shook his head, pointed to my hands, which must have to do with the withdrawal symptoms the leaf had helped with, and then he pantomimed sleeping. I wouldn't be loopy this time, was what he was trying to tell me. It was late. I'd just go to sleep.

Okay, I supposed that was true. I took it from him, and as before, had no trouble getting it down. Hunter rose, walked over to me, and kissed me, this time on the lips. My heart fluttered. I caught my breath. He held my gaze and then leaned over to kiss my cheek. Whispering something in my ear that of course I couldn't understand, it still moved through me like he'd said something romantic accompanied by a goodnight kiss.

He backed off and went back to the fire. Leader watched us the night before; tonight it was Hunter's turn. Doctor patted the ground next to him, which suggested I should lie in between Leader and him. I wasn't opposed to the idea, but Leader slept on my lap. Maybe I shouldn't move.

Doctor jumped up, grabbed the bag where they stored their clothes, and laid it on the ground. He motioned for me to put my head on it. I pointed at Leader and Doc nodded, then pointed at the bag again.

All right... well, he could take it up with Leader if he was pissed because I woke him. I scooted over to the bag, and Leader just kind of adjusted. He wasn't on my lap, but he was

still out cold, pressed against my back, his arm flung over me as he lay on the ground, clearly not disturbed.

Doctor grinned like he'd known it would work out that way. Maybe it was their thing—they hung around with solo women enough that they all knew how the others would behave. The thought filled me with sadness. My time with them was special for me, entirely unique. If their behavior was normal for Planet Wolf, I was going to feel robbed of something. I couldn't even really explain it to myself.

As he'd done the night before, Doctor slid in on the other side of me and held me up against him, too. This time we faced each other. He kissed my forehead then the tip of my nose. I caught my breath. They kept startling me with their easy affection. Would I ever get used to it? Or would it all end before I could?

The leaf did its job, and I giggled. I might be a little loopy before I went to sleep. Doctor grinned at me. Seemed it didn't bother him at all. I hummed a little bit again, and he watched me like it was the greatest thing he'd ever seen someone do.

Or maybe that was just the loopy leaf making my brain take a left turn to stupid thoughts.

Eventually, I closed my eyes.

I dreamed of Wolves, but not of my companions. No, these Wolves were tearing at me, eating my bones while I was still alive and screaming. They wore Union uniforms, and they laughed while they did it. The ones who had come to take my mother had laughed like that, too. Like it was funny she was so lost.

A strong hand pulled me from the dream. Next to me, Doc was out cold, and it took Leader rolling me over for me to realize it was him who'd woken me up. Unlike when I'd fallen asleep, he was wide awake. Maybe my nightmare woke him? I needed to apologize. He sat upright and tugged me into his lap. I wrapped my legs around him, and he held me pressed against him with his arms, my head on his shoulder.

Had I cried out? Disturbed him? How did he know I needed him right then?

He rocked me back and forth in his arms, making sounds that were similar to the sshh I might do to someone waking from a bad dream at home. The sounds of Doctor gently snoring reached me, and I stifled a giggle. Hunter must be awake, too, but I couldn't see him right then. Not from the safety of Leader's arms. Had anywhere ever been so safe? I breathed the scent of him deep into my lungs.

It must have been the leaf, because I fell asleep in his arms in a way that no one had ever held me before. While I slept, I didn't dream again.

Funny how whispering could sometimes be louder than screaming. I lifted my head from the bag turned makeshift pillow. I was alone on the floor, but I could see the three guys whispering to each other in a language I couldn't compute. Despite not understanding their words, I had a pretty good idea they were talking about leaving the cave.

All of them were shirtless, and all of them wore serious expressions. Currently, Hunter pointed at the entrance with rapid movements of his strong, muscular arms. He gestured in a big way that meant he was being very, very intense. Doc shook his head. No, whatever they were saying he didn't like, but Leader nodded. He agreed with Hunter.

In an equal movement to Hunter, Doc pointed at me, although he didn't turn to look at me or he would've seen I was awake.

I could guess their argument had to do with me. Leader and Hunter wanted to leave the cave. A quick glance proved the snow stopped, but Doc didn't think I could do it. He'd have reason to believe that, since it wasn't like I was in great shape.

I got to my feet. "We have to go?"

They all swung around at the same time, brows furrowed, when I did speak, which might have been funny if I hadn't been determined to get a move on. I couldn't sit around

waiting to detox while enjoying loopy leaves. We had to get to the mountain. These guys had to get on with their lives. I hoped they didn't have wives or husbands. They'd all been very affectionate with me, although who knew what that even meant on their planet? Standards of behavior might very well vary.

I began to walk past them. "Which way?"

Leader grabbed my arm and shook his head. *I need to thank him for what he did last night.* I'd probably disturbed the only night of sleep he'd had in a while. I knew at the very least he'd been up the night before.

Hunter took me from Leader and swung me onto his back. It was a good thing I had the sense to grab onto him. *Okay. Apparently, this is how we're going.* But he couldn't hold me forever. I was small, but even my weight was going to be too much for him to Bear. Wouldn't it? How strong were these guys compared to regular Earthborn-human men?

Doctor threw his hands in the air but followed when Hunter ran out of the cave. Snow might not have been falling, but the evidence from the nighttime snowstorm coated everything in pillowy softness. A wonderland had taken over the whole area. All the big trees bent from the weight of the sparkling sea, and the ground was like a blanket of white nothingness. No sharp edges existed anymore, everything softened by it. Of course, if I spent too much time touching it or out in the elements, I'd die. It was deathly pretty, lethally gorgeous, like so many other things in the world.

Hunter, however, was warm. Like a furnace. He grabbed the bag from Leader, who shifted the second he'd handed it over. Doctor did the same. They ran ahead, and where they were going or what they were doing, I had no idea, but they must have preferred to do it in Wolf form.

That just left Hunter and me. He carried me like it was no big deal and headed easily in the direction of the others.

I wished we could talk. It would be such a good time to get to know one another. Like I could ask... *Do you kiss all the girls?* No. I wouldn't ask that. So silly. I would have more

interesting things to say. I was actually great at parties and meetings. I could get people to open up about all sorts of things. I'd start off by asking him what he did for a living. What sorts of things made him happy. Had he read any wonderful books lately?

Those sorts of things. I certainly wouldn't obsess over whether or not he went around kissing lots of women, and why it was okay with him that the other guys had kissed me in front of him. Didn't they have jealousy on their planet? Nope. Not those sorts of questions.

La. La. La. I wasn't going to be this ridiculous, was I?

The longer we ran, the more I became aware of two things. The first was that the sun actually felt beautiful on my skin, like it could warm the universe. Well, Hunter and the sun could warm it together. He was practically a furnace. And my stomach was empty. It groaned, and he skidded to a stop.

Hunter kicked away some snow and set me down in the space he'd cleared. The trees dripped down on us, but it was gentle and not constant, just an indication that nature was thawing out the storm.

With swift movements, he opened up the bag and handed me some of the meat from the night before. I took small bites, chewing each piece a long time and swallowing gently. Then I'd pause to make sure my often-annoying body accepted the offering as food and wasn't treating it like poison it immediately needed to expel from my system.

I seemed to be keeping it down, which was so wonderful, I had to grin at him again. "Thank you."

A Wolf howled in the distance, and he turned his head to stare in that direction. Was it one of our Wolves? Could he actually understand what they were saying in Wolf when he wasn't one?

What was I going to do with all these questions and no answers? *Well, I'm going to store them away and probably make him nuts with them when I can actually ask them.*

He shook his head, rolled his eyes, and then turned back to me. Without warning, he kissed me. It wasn't even so much a kiss as his lips met mine, he tugged me against his body and off the ground, all in practically one move. And he didn't kiss me as he owned my mouth. Minute after minute, he took my lips as his. I could hardly keep up to breathe, but who needed air, anyway? He consumed my very senses. When he finally pulled back, we both panted. Hunter tugged me into a hug, pressing my head onto his shoulder. I clung to him. My senses had never been so awake, so aware. Every nerve ending in my body cried out for more as my brain decided to give up on understanding what was happening. *I could just stay like this. Who needs to move?* Until he kissed me again.

I didn't see the Wolf that banged into his legs until it did just that. I squirmed to be able to see him—Doc? Leader was gray and this one was brown. Hunter groaned and then nodded.

In another swift adjustment of my body, I was back where I'd spent the morning traveling and we were on our way.

This time, Doc didn't leave us, circling as we ran forward. It looked like Hunter had broken some kind of rule, and he was being watched now. I smiled against his back. Who knew I would so love being kissed? *And kissed. And kissed.*

The sun melted the snow away. By late that afternoon, it was all but totally gone, and I was too hot riding on Hunter's back. Really, the weather here was astronomically weird. Shouldn't there be storms or something, due to the change in temperature? None of it made any sense, and we still weren't at the mountain. Just as I was feeling like I really, really needed to get down to cool off, two Wolves that I recognized right away appeared next to us.

Hunter stopped his jog—he didn't even seem bothered by running and carrying me all day—and set me down. Leader banged into my side gently, and I grinned at him.

It was funny, actually. Our family hadn't kept any pets growing up. Not a cat, not a dog, not even a goldfish. Too many people lived in our house, even though it spanned a city block, and my grandmother—who then, and even after death, remained the grand dame of the family—refused to consider them.

Her grandchildren underfoot day in and day out, *yes*. Animals, *absolutely not*.

I didn't even know how Wolves behaved versus dogs—another question I'd like to ask.

They shifted back and grabbed the bag from Hunter very quickly. Maybe they'd cued into my nudity sensitivity, because they jumped into their pants a lot quicker than a few days ago. I stared at the mountain in the distance, giving them what privacy I could. It didn't seem closer. I completely

underestimated the distance the first day, when we started this trek. Maybe I'd been concussed or just out of my mind from being nearly exploded, but it really hadn't occurred to me how far away we had to go.

So, a very long trip, and somehow, I had to do it without burdening these people who, despite bringing me this far, could abandon me at any time. I steeled my back.

I hoped I could figure out a way to communicate what I needed them to understand. "If all of you want to be Wolves..." I began, and then I got down on all fours and tried to walk like them, to indicate their transformation. Leader found it really funny. He actually threw his head back in laughter at my example, and I tried not to glare at him, since this wasn't easy. I pulled myself back to my feet. I still had a point to make, despite his amusement.

"You could scratch the trees," I demonstrated. "And then I could try to follow you so you don't have to carry me." I pointed at Hunter's back. "Or wait for me." I tapped my feet like I was waiting.

All three of them shook their head *no* at the same time. My face fell before I could hide my expression.

"I don't know how to mime out the idea that I don't want to be too much for you. I don't want you to not like me or regret that you saved me and brought me with you when this is over."

They obviously didn't understand me, but they must have somehow picked up on my vibe because Doc put his arm around me and drew me to him. He kissed my temple and kept his mouth there a long second. It was a comforting gesture. Like he didn't know why I was upset, but he was sorry that I felt that way.

"Does anyone have any water?" That I could manage to show, using one hand like it was a glass and pretending to drink.

Hunter shook his head but then shifted and ran, like he was going to get some. Did they still have the bucket from in the

cave? Where had they gotten it in the first place? Was it in the bag? Because he didn't have that with him. He must have realized, because he came back, grabbed the bucket out of the bag, still in his Wolf form, and ran off.

Doc made no move to let me go. Just staying there, me pressed against his side.

Leader walked over and took my hand. He placed it on his cheek and leaned into it. For a second, he closed his eyes and he just seemed to breathe. Standing there in the woods, around the snow dripping pine trees, Leader and Doc were perfectly content to just stand with me.

Right then, I didn't feel sick. Or weak. It was such an unusual sensation that I really just had to acknowledge them when I was lucky enough to find one. Hunter came back with the bucket, this time walking on two feet. Leader handed him some pants.

One of these times, I was going to look down and see what their things looked like. *Things. Am I five?* I just never thought about male stuff. I went out of my way not to. And... none of this was helping.

"Are we going to walk until nightfall?" I was still trying to figure out how to navigate asking in pantomime when a sound stopped us in our tracks. I looked up just as Leader shoved me against a tree, essentially hiding both of us from view. In fact, he'd shoved his body in front of mine.

Hunter and Doctor were on opposite trees from us, all of us out of view from the planes above us. I stared up. They were Union signature shuttles. Shouldn't they want to see them? That was their rescue flying by.

"What are you doing? We should be flagging them down."

He held me tighter. After the planes were gone, he finally let me go.

I pointed toward the sky. "What in the heck was that about?"

Leader's eyes were Wolf. He actually let out a growl. *Well, he didn't like that.* Maybe because I'd yelled? I took two steps

back from him. Yep. Things just changed direction from me. He was a Wolf and he'd growled. If he wanted to shift, he could kill me.

“Okay. I'm sorry I yelled. I won't do it again.” I put my hands out in front of me. I hoped it would pacify him. “Sorry, okay? Sorry.”

He shook his head. He wouldn't accept my apology, so I wasn't sure what to do. He walked toward me, his eyes thankfully back to human, and grabbed onto my hands. Everything about how he held himself was stiff. He pulled me against him roughly.

And quickly started the rocking thing again. Why was he doing this? Confusion muddled my brain. He'd just been growling at me, hadn't he? Was he growling at something else?

Had I misread him?

Finally, he let me go. He breathed hard, worry obvious on all his features. Doc walked over, rubbing my back once he reached me, and Hunter put a hand on Leader. I tried to focus on Doc's touch and calming my heart. It raced in my chest, a butterfly bashing itself uselessly against my ribcage.

“Sshh,” Doctor said, sounding like every doctor anywhere. It was exactly what I'd have done at home to soothe someone upset. Maybe I had completely misunderstood what happened?

We had to address the tension, even though we couldn't talk. I pointed at Leader then my throat. He'd growled. And then I put my hand over my heart. It was racing. Did he understand what I was saying?

He nodded and then touched his throat before he pointed at the sky.

He'd been growling at the planes. He didn't like something about them. Leader walked toward me then put his hand over my heart. Slowly, he slid his finger down my nose, then ran his fingertips over my cheeks. He touched the space over his own heart. I could tell he tried to tell me something important, but

although I didn't understand all of it, the general meaning seemed to be he wasn't going to hurt me.

I nodded. "Okay. I understand."

Hunter said something to him then. The three of them got into a discussion, and I took a step away to let them. I didn't feel like playing *what are they saying* right then. He'd growled at the Union planes, but that didn't make sense. What was happening?

I rubbed my hand over my face. Once, then twice. I'd started doing it as a kid to calm myself. My hands shook again. Was it the withdrawal or the anxiety I'd just felt? I put my hands on my knees and breathed. This seemed to get Doc's attention, because he came right over to check on me.

He wouldn't be waved away, though I tried. He checked my pulse and scowled. I guessed it wasn't a good number, but that checked. It didn't feel great, either.

I had to pee again, which was the one activity they allowed me to complete unsupervised. I tried to focus on that instead of my heart, but questions still peppered my thoughts like arrows as I relieved myself.

Why had the wolves wanted a meeting with the Union and others out in the middle of nowhere? I thought the Wolves were all pro-Union, yet they'd growled at the planes. That didn't make sense, not when I thought Wolves were, like, *woo-hoo, go Union, let's destroy the universe* sort of groups.

Once I returned from my time alone, Hunter fed me water. They seemed to like to use their hands to feed and, for lack of a better word, water me. Like I was a house plant. Or something the gardener had to handle.

What a funny comparison.

"I can walk," I told them, hoping they would understand. I walked forward, like I wanted to continue the way we'd gone. "Who's going with me?"

They all stared at me, and I smiled in an attempt to reassure them. That was when I met Hunter's gaze. He blinked, and I swore; it was like I could feel everything he felt

right then, a tri-fold hit of sensations. Firstly, he was in utter awe of me. That was a strange thing for me to digest, but I was like a solar eclipse to him. He never thought he would actually see me in his lifetime, which was a bizarre thought. Next, he was completely invested in wanting to make the plan happen. There was the sense that it was his job to see it through, whatever *it* was. And, finally, I could sense his terror. He feared he might fuck the whole thing up and ruin it. He knew failure was a possibility, even though he pushed the thought away a lot, and he carried his fear with him constantly.

Fuck *what* up? What was he worried about? I blinked. No, that was just insane. I didn't read minds, I couldn't sense his feelings, and I didn't understand what people were thinking or feeling unless they told me.

He shook his head and pointed left. Did he want to go that way? He must have confused the others, because they both stared at him, their expressions saying they weren't sure what he meant. His grin was playful, though, and he took off running, which made the other two smile, even if Doc rolled his eyes.

My medically inclined companion scooped me up, so I was on his back as we ran after Hunter. Leader trailed behind us at a distance, looking left and right while he ran. I nearly strained my neck trying to watch him for a while before I gave up.

Instead, I just clung to Doc and decided to enjoy the view. I could have walked, was willing to, but this was something else, and I guessed it was fine to be carried so I could keep up. Like Hunter, he was warm, like a blanket.

I didn't realize it at first, but I'd been cataloging the things that were different about them from humans—they could shift into Wolves, which was obviously a really huge difference. There were other differences, too, though. They were hot, and not just looking. They didn't seem to feel the cold like I did. And, they also didn't seem to need to eat at the intervals when I'd usually be hungry. Here, I was less so than at home, but maybe that might be caused by stress. I should pay attention to how much water I drank, too. I needed more, but it was hard to

think about mundane needs when survival became such a priority.

I heard where we headed before I saw it. The sound of loud, rushing water consumed everything, and the spray hit my face gently before I even registered the sight of the massive waterfall before us. Hunter stood on the edge of it, grinning. He must have found it when he went to get the water.

Unless they knew the area better than I realized. They'd certainly found the cave while I'd been unconscious, but for all I knew, that could be instincts or something. Was it just a Wolf thing? It didn't really matter in the moment, because the waterfall was stunning. It towered above us like a monolith, and a rainbow cut through the running water as though it greeted us, welcoming us to this place.

I'd never seen one before, not in person. Maybe it was making me a little loopy, because my heart thumped hard while I gazed at the roaring noise and wet shower. Hunter stood in the pool of water at the foot of the falls. Leader caught up to us and joined him there. That was when it finally dawned on me that they were constantly barefoot. *Didn't that hurt like hell?* Maybe I'd add strong tolerance for pain and/or perhaps they just had really tough feet.

Was the water cold? Doc set me down, and I kicked off my shoes to head in. Icy coldness encased my foot, and I shivered but grinned. It made sense. Snow had just melted all around us, and probably right into this pool.

Still, it was awesome to feel it. I desperately needed to be clean, and I wondered if Hunter planned that when he brought us there. The guys didn't smell bad at all—nicely scented body odor got added to the list of differences—but I knew that I did. Oh fuck it, I didn't care that it was cold, I was rinsing off. Obviously, nudity wasn't a problem for them, so without overthinking it further, I stripped, throwing my clothes off to the side before diving into the water.

I wasn't a great swimmer, but considering my issues, I could hold my own. I heard a gasp from one of them before I went under. The cold exhilarated me, bringing my skin to

stinging life, and when I came up, I was giddy, giggling out loud from the sheer joy of the sensations. I swam for the falls. I wanted to feel the water coming down on me.

Three splashes caught my attention, but I didn't look back. By the time I reached my goal, Leader hauled me back against him. They were all wet now, but he didn't look upset. If anything, he seemed totally at ease. Doc and Hunter surrounded me, too, in the circle of their bodies as we all treaded water in the water that should be too cold for me yet wasn't.

I laughed because I could. Leader's joy struck me. This was all he wanted, for everyone to be able to be happy. It had been so lost. And now there was this true happiness. What would he do if he lost it? He just couldn't allow that to happen, not ever. I had to be protected above all things, even beyond the plans they'd already made.

I blinked. There I went again with my totally overactive imagination, pretending I could read his mind. I ducked down to swim away from their circle of protection but stopped short of touching the falling water. It was coming down a lot stronger than I'd anticipated. Close was good enough. I'd never forget that moment for my whole life, regardless of how long that might be.

Eventually, though, the cold caught up to me. I shivered and tried to swim for the shore. The guys followed me, and I was no sooner out than I was back in Leader's arms. He was like a furnace, so the feel of him against my chilled skin was all pleasure. I turned to face him, which was tricky with his arms around me.

His gaze held mine. There was no mistaking what was in his mind, and I didn't have to have a weird moment of understanding to grasp his thoughts. Pure male interest glowed from his dark depths. We were both naked. All four of us were, and currently my chilled skin pressed up against his hot, smooth flesh.

I breathed heavily, a little drunk on the day and the feel of him. Maybe if life was fair, in a different existence, we could

do something about the molten need that flooded my body. And not just for Leader, whose cock hardened against my skin, but for all three of them. Would they be okay with that? I wondered, imagining it with a smile. If I wanted all of them? It wasn't done on earth, or if it was, no one discussed it in my presence. But... maybe the rules were different on their planet. They were on the Cat Planet, because Tiffany had told me all about it. *Is it like that here?* Or maybe these three Wolves didn't give two shits about other people's rules?

We could stay in this place, I thought with a smile. *All of us lost to society.* They could hunt—they'd already done it several times—and we could bathe in the waterfall. Everyone probably already thought I was dead back home. They would mourn me, but it wouldn't have been long before they were doing that anyway. These three could leave their lives—whatever they were before—and just stay with me until the end. All of us living, just existing together. Making love by waterfalls.

I blinked. It was a beautiful, romantic thought. I could almost even see it, like four wild people out of literature. *Giving up society. Living to be free.*

Maybe we could even work out the logistics, if we could've actually spoken to one another.

I swallowed. We couldn't live there forever. It just wasn't realistic. At some point, the medicines in my system would run out, and I'd require immediate lifesaving medical care. Far more medical care than Doc could give me, with no real drugs at his disposal and just the occasional leaf for medication. I also couldn't forget the promise I made with myself. I repeated my goal in my mind, as if thinking it again would cement it or perhaps help me manifest my plan. I would get Doug elected and the Union ousted. That was the best way for me to spend what time I had left.

Not to mention—and it was probably the biggest problem with my attraction to these men—I'd never done *it* ever before. What was I going to do? Just lie down on the dirt? Anxiety had always ridden me hard on the subject, which was why I'd never pursued sexual relationships in the past.

Still... these men were gorgeous. Built like they'd been sculpted out of stone, and they were all looking at me like my naked form was everything they wanted and then some. I wasn't stupid. Circumstances were playing a role in our mutual attraction, too. I might not be who they would've picked if we were all clothed and in the city, but a naked body was a naked body, and we were alone in the woods.

I had to remember... *What did I have to remember?* My mouth had suddenly gone dry. Maybe I didn't have to think at all. Each breath rubbed my chest against his, eliciting the most delicious cascade of sensations and tempting me further.

I could just lift my lips a little bit, and Leader would be right there. He'd... Leader pulled me out of the water so fast my head spun. They were all out, in fact, and before I could even attempt to gauge from Leader what was wrong, he moved.

His eyes turned canine and predatory, and he passed me so fast to Hunter that I didn't have time to register what happened until afterward. Doc handed me clothes and then practically dressed me while Hunter held me still. They'd gone incredibly silent, all of them wearing the same wolfish look in their gaze.

Finally, Leader shifted, his animal form flowing over his skin as if it had been there all along. I blinked, watching him with the same awe that every shift seemed to bring to me. It was just so beautiful.

He growled, his haunches on display this time. Leader hadn't looked like this before, not even when they'd been fighting the poison birds.

Doc wrenched me out of Hunter's arms a second before Hunter shifted, following Leader in this display. Behind me, Doc's body seemed to vibrate. He wanted to shift, too, I could feel it in my pores.

I pulled out of his hold. "Go ahead, if you need to. I'll stay right here."

We didn't speak the same language, but he must have understood me, because he did just as I'd asked. I backed up,

hitting a tree behind me, just as three black Wolves appeared. I caught my breath. Were these shifters or just Wolves? And why were they so angry?

Based on the reactions of my Wolves, I would guess they were shifters. Doc hadn't left my side. He'd shifted, but only to stay right in front of me.

The bark of the tree bit into my neck, where my shirt didn't cover me. It hurt but not as much as those Wolves' claws would if they came for me. Leader didn't wait for them to jump on him, he leaped into the air, taking the lead Wolf from the other group all the way to the ground in one motion. They tore at each other, teeth clacking in fury and snarls.

I'd never seen a Wolf fight before and it was brutal. I tried not to close my eyes from the aggression of it even as I cringed in horror. Violence had never been part of my life, and I guessed that was part of my privilege. But... this was visceral, brutal, and... the longer I watched, the more dynamic it became. My horror shifted into something else. Pride? I blinked. That was a funny emotion, but I couldn't help but admit I was in fact proud as I watched Leader.

He was strong, tough, and he was taking down the Wolf who opposed him. Hunter darted forward. With precision, he took down one of the other Wolves. How had he known that man was about to try to dart in for an attack?

I leaned forward. Yes, they were going to take them down. Leader had torn the first Wolf to shreds, so when he turned his attention to the third Wolf, the creature ran from him. Leader took him down, too, though. I guessed changing his mind wasn't an option today for the enemy.

I loved it.

Catching my breath, I tried to understand what the heck was going on with my own thoughts. *This isn't me*. I didn't find this kind of thing sexy—not that I'd ever seen anything like the Wolf fight before, ever.

I rubbed at my face. It was over almost as soon as it started, but what had been going on? Who were these people?

All three of my guys shifted back into their human forms. I panted; they were fine. The trouble with not being able to talk with them was I had no idea how to find out who just attacked or why.

What is happening? It seemed the question applied to a lot of levels of my situation. And why did I feel like I'd just been through the fight when all I had done was stand by protected by Doc.

He cupped my cheek and grinned at me. That feeling of being alive hit me again, and I wondered if that was what health was like, what people who didn't live with daily discomfort could claim as their normal lives. Just the sense that I could run from here to the mountains if they wanted me to.

Leader walked over and placed his head against my shoulder. He sniffed at my neck and then grinned at me, similarly to Doc. His Wolf was close. How did I know that? I had no idea. I was just pretty sure I did.

Hunter bumped me from the side before he kissed my cheek.

They were grinning at me, at each other. It was such a happy moment considering we had three dead Wolf bodies nearby. *Wait*. They weren't Wolf anymore. Apparently, when a Wolf died, it shifted back. Torn to shreds, three human bodies were strewn on the ground.

I swallowed. Okay, much of my elation fled into a wave of nausea. It was time to get out of here.

As if they read my mind, the guys grabbed pants again, and this time Leader carried me. I was so flustered from the whole Wolf attack and bodies, it didn't occur to me to not let him. In fact, it wasn't the only thing I wasn't focused on in that moment. Somehow, it also didn't occur to me that I'd left my shoes behind until we were at least an hour on our way from there. *Fuck*. I didn't have shoes. I closed my eyes and sighed. I better get used to being carried.

We walked past dark, stopping only when my stomach rumbled again. They really didn't seem to like it when my stomach made noise. It spurred them into action, and in minutes we'd stopped, Doctor had built a fire, and Hunter had left—presumably to go find food. I was glad they'd stopped, though. My earlier fear about my lack of medicines becoming a problem was fast becoming a real issue.

My stomach hurt. I leaned forward, gripping it, and Doc rubbed my back in circles. “I don't suppose you have any more of the happy leaf on you?”

He pressed his nose to the back of my neck and took a deep breath. It was strangely comforting and didn't feel weird, although it probably should have. Nothing about the way they treated me made a lot of sense, yet all of it had been lovely. Maybe I was simply affection starved.

Unfortunately, the gentle touching and breathing didn't take care of the issue. There was only so much that anyone could do for me in this situation, which I understood. I had to remember that I felt great all day. I really had, and that would get me through the pain.

Being pain free at all was so unusual that I needed to feel grateful for it and not overwhelmingly mad because literally everything hurt again. My *eyelashes* hurt. How was that even possible? I groaned and Doc put his hand on my forehead then the back of my neck. Finally, he checked my pulse. Things moved fast after that.

I was in his arms, and we were running. *What is happening?* My current favorite question, right? It was sort of confusing, though, and I tried to make sense of things. If they wanted to travel more for the day, shouldn't we wait for the other two? *Oh well.* I didn't suppose it mattered. Not when there was so much pain, and it took far more attention than asking questions no one would understand.

At some point, Leader caught up to us. I couldn't be sure—because really what could I be sure of?—but it seemed we'd traveled a lot further in the hours Doc had run with me than we had been doing up until then. The mountain certainly seemed closer.

He and Leader spoke in loud voices. With a smooth move, Leader took me from Doc who, in turn, took the bag from Leader. We'd left a fire burning in the woods, and a moment of concern flickered through me. Forest fires could do a lot of damage, but I knew nothing of the environment on their planet.

I blinked. Maybe Hunter was putting out the fire. I smiled at that thought. *We couldn't be responsible for burning things.*

Another flare of pain rolled through me like a thunderclap. I moaned. Yes, I was still hurting, and now I had to puke. *Ugh.* I tugged on Leader's arm. He needed to put me down so I could be sick. But he didn't listen to me, he just kept running toward the mountain.

I closed my eyes, the rocking motion of his steps causing little explosions of pain.

I woke up to the sun glaring down on me. I groaned. It was way too light in this room... only it wasn't a room. Not at all. I was in Hunter's arms, and we were somewhere I'd never seen before. A town of some kind. Brown roofs, and every building looked the same. Where had Hunter come from? I didn't even remember him arriving. And where was I?

The nausea came then, enthusiastic in its urgency. I was going to puke. Hunter set me down in time, and I rolled onto my stomach to hurl. He rubbed my back and said things to me that I couldn't understand but appreciated anyway as I heaved

helplessly. Doc knelt so that he was in my line of view. He kept talking, too.

But there were a ton of other people around as well, and they all stared at us. I blinked, trying to clear my vision, which had become blurry. And maybe it was the people—maybe that was why I didn't notice what I should have noticed.

Shuttles landed all around us. Three of them. I blinked, recognizing Union insignias. *Fuck*. I was in so much trouble. I tried to sit up, but Hunter, who appeared to my left, stopped me.

Then there was a commotion. A tall, dark-haired man yelled at Leader, his arms waving furiously. He was mad, but Leader really didn't seem to care. More strangers surrounded the other two, and everyone's voices rose. Doc kept pointing at me and then at his ear.

That was about as much as I could comprehend past the fuzziness of my thoughts. It was like I watched the scene unfold from somewhere else, as though I'd left my body and wasn't in it anymore.

I paid no attention to the metallic taste in my mouth or how I couldn't stop staring at the Union signage, couldn't pull my attention from it at all.

My body went stiff.

Distantly—in a way that I couldn't have explained, not even if I'd been forced to under threat of death—I knew I was about to have a seizure.

Then I did.



I WOKE up to the beeping sounds of a hospital, the sound so familiar, it was practically like being at home.

“I think she's waking up.” I recognized Patrice's voice, and I wrenched my eyes open. Her smile was huge, even if her eyes were tired. I saw her eyes tired more than not, which was

one of the unexpected side effects of my illness. I got to see how it affected my family, which I hated even more than actually being sick.

Doug's face came into view, wearing the worn out but relieved expression I knew so well.

Doug and Patrice were cousins raised like siblings with me under the care of our dotting-but-tough-on-us grandparents. They were the closest things I'd ever have to siblings, and I missed them.

It was sort of bizarre to hear them speak... and understand what they were saying.

"Hi." My mouth was dry, so Doug offered me some water that I sipped carefully before I handed the glass back to him. Refreshed, I began the hard work of trying to sit up. I knew the routine—I could practically repeat verbatim what would happen next, what the process would be to go home.

I blinked. "What am I doing here? I was on Planet Wolf..."

Doug thumped loudly into his chair. "Yes, about that. The next time you decide to go off on an adventure, I'd really appreciate hearing it from you and not from Patrice. Sound fair? I know you were trying to help me, but you almost got blown up by some faction the Bears sent. I'd rather have you than any kind of leadership position, anyway. Got it?"

I sighed. We could talk about all of that, but... confusion made it nearly impossible for me to focus. "How did I get here?"

"You had a seizure, that's all I know. Afterward, you became property, basically, of the Union who ID'd you and contacted us. We paid to get you back. That was several days ago. They transported you here." He leveled a stare at me. "They don't know for sure that you were in the explosion. They're blaming it on the Bears, but they suspect it. We denied any knowledge of your actions, so that's where we are."

That still didn't answer what I really wanted to know. *What happened to my three companions?* "What about the men I was with?"

They looked at each other and then back at me. Patrice finally asked, “What men?”

“Three Wolf shifters. I was with them the whole time. I’m alive *because* of them.” *Leader. Doctor. Hunter.* “They saved me and then kept me alive. Maybe... I think Doc—that’s what I thought of one of them as—he knew I was getting worse. We ran... then here I am.”

Doug sighed. “I don’t know anything about any Wolf shifters. The Union told us that they found you in a town. They didn’t know how you got there, but we know the Union lies. About everything. So, whatever happened to your saviors, I don’t know. I’m sorry. Maybe they’re the ones who got you help? I can’t begin to guess.”

My heart raced as Doug spoke, and the machines beeped louder. I closed my eyes. I wanted to curl in a ball and disappear. I would have, if moving didn’t hurt so much. Hearing that they were just... gone? It was like someone took a drill and put a hole right where my soul was supposed to be. I teared up and wiped the wetness away. What was wrong with me?

“I don’t even know their names. Not their real names, anyway. I can’t find them.” I sniffed. “And they did so much for me.”

They made me feel alive when I’d been dying for the entirety of my life. They were kind to me. And beautiful in a way men were not supposed to be. I didn’t speak those last sentences aloud. I could never share the really important thoughts with anyone.

“Honey?” Patrice stroked my hair. “Are you okay?”

No. I’m not okay. That’s what I wanted to say. I’ve never been okay. I will never be okay. I just go day by day waiting for time to pass, trying to do anything meaningful, so that it’s evident that I was here at all.

“Sure, I’m fine. Just overwhelmed,” I lied.

I said that instead because it was easier for everyone if I pretended to be okay. My cousins weren’t responsible for what

happened. They weren't the reason I'd never know the real names of the men who had held me at night, carried me through the wilderness, swam with me, laughed with me, and kissed me—all without knowing a thing about me.

They seemed to care.

I wiped at my eyes again. Well, clearly, they *had*. They thought I was Union, so they gave me back to the Union. And, they'd taken care of me until they could, which was more than I had any right to expect from them.

Patrice lay down next to me in the hospital bed. "You've been through a lot."

She really had no idea how true of a statement she'd just made. "Yes."

Doug shook his head. "Don't risk yourself going forward, Esther. We love you. You know that, right? And Lucas and the others feel the same, too. He was here until he had to run a shipment back to Earth. The oranges were going bad."

My cousin, the bad pilot who trailed me, was running oranges back to Earth. It was so typical of our family and the random things we did. Yes, they loved me. I did know that. And I loved them, too, only right then, it did nothing to fill the hole that losing three men I really hadn't truthfully known created inside of me. I put my head on Patrice's shoulder. "When can I get out of here?"

"A while. They don't like that you were unconscious for so long. That's never happened before to you."

Why had that happened? Was it some kind of indication of something dire? I was too tired to care.

"This really sucks, Patrice." I just had to say it. "Everything is just the pits. I've tried to be upbeat and not burdensome, but I am so pissed. And upset. I just have to say it. I really fucking hate this."

She nodded. "I know. Me too."

Doug raised his hand. "Me three."

I did love my family, and I was luckier than most. Somehow, I would have to remember that as I slowly died inside, though I couldn't explain, even to myself, why.



I TRIED to find my purpose again. Doug held rallies, and I stayed toward the back. He talked about the Union, and all of the ill they did to the universe and to Earth itself. Truth was ever since they gave me back to Doug for so little money or concern, it dawned on me how little the organization cared about us or the fuss we were supposed to be making about them. They hardly charged anything for my return. If they really considered us a threat, I would've been dead. They simply would've killed me when I was out cold and been done with me.

It was late afternoon, so I needed to get home, change my clothes, and get to Patrice's art show. Nine months pregnant, and she was still amazing. The governor, an ally of Doug's, was hosting the show. It would be a chance to raise credits for our cause of ousting the Union while also celebrating Patrice's incredible talent.

Of course, her husband was losing his shit. All he wanted was for Patrice to rest inside with her feet up until the baby came. But Patrice was the most like our grandmother out of all of us. She tended to get what she wanted with just a look, so the showing at the governor's house was happening whether Doug or her husband liked it or not.

Since I wasn't currently bedridden, I was expected to go.

It took me a long time to get home, since I walked slowly at the moment. It was as though my trek through Planet Wolf sucked away what little energy I had most of the time.

Or maybe it was the big gaping hole around my heart that seemed to be getting worse every day.

I sighed. It didn't help to think about it. If anything, it only made it worse. I had to stay busy, and for the most part, I did. But every day there was a time that it was all just too much.

I forced myself up the stairs of my house, passing the wings that belonged to my cousins. Somewhere in the distances of the halls, someone else was laughing. The portrait of my grandmother watched me as I entered my room, or at least it felt that way. It had always seemed like her eyes were on me.

As though the painting were alive.

Well... I hope she likes my dress this evening. I was pretty sure she would've approved, since she always liked me to wear white. She herself felt she looked faded out in the shade, but she loved to see me in it. She would've loved the dress I planned to wear, if she'd attended the event—long, sleeveless, V-neck, and summery. I pulled my nearly black hair into a messy bun that wasn't the rage anymore, but I liked how it looked. I finished it off with just a little bit of gloss.

My grandmother had been gorgeous until the day she died. I smirked at the memory. She once told me she would be the most beautiful corpse there ever was, and she wasn't wrong. Patrice and a few of my other cousins giggled through the whole funeral when reminded of that remark.

I'd been too busy wondering if I would be next.

But I was still around. Every year, the doctors indicated it might be my last, yet I continued so far. I was strong despite everything. Well, I had been strong. Now I could feel the hole around my heart starting to take over. Three men, and I didn't even know their names. I shook my head. Even if I did, it wouldn't matter. Humans weren't allowed on Planet Wolf as a rule, and I was certainly not getting back there anytime soon.

What would I do if I could make it back? Start describing them to strangers and hope someone somewhere on the planet knew who I was talking about?

I had to let it go. I needed to focus on getting Doug elected, even if it felt more like a pipe dream every day. Or I could figure out another career for myself. Maybe I should go visit my mother, although she'd have no idea who I was.

I finished dressing and made my way downstairs. A car waited to take me to the governor's, so I climbed in, feeling my loneliness more acutely than normal. Years ago, we would've all ridden to the event together, but we lived on the same estate and barely saw each other. All of my relations, gone on to have lives, and even though they loved me completely, I lived peripherally from the rest of them.

Unless I was having a medical incident, they didn't pay that close of attention to my comings and goings anymore. *As it should be, really. We're all adults. It's time for me to get a life.*

Mine is supposed to be elsewhere.

I blinked. That kind of thinking wasn't helpful.

The exhibit was booming by the time I arrived, and all of the people looked gorgeous as they mulled around Patrice's paintings. She looked radiant in red, her blonde hair striking as she laughed at something one of the patrons said. Patrice was the most beautiful pregnant person I'd ever seen, and my lips curled upward at seeing her glowing.

Across the room, she caught my eye, and I winked at her before I began walking around the room. That fake laugh she did for the sake of putting others at ease always grated at my nerves. She knew it did, and it had become a joke between us over the years. Her husband hovered nearby, a glass of what I thought was whisky in his hand. He sipped it and nodded at me, acknowledging my presence.

I found a group of donors I knew and stopped to speak to them. After this night, I might sleep for two days, maybe three, but damn it, I'd raise money for the cause.

"You look so well, Esther."

I knew that I didn't, but I smiled. I hated when people said that to me, but I smiled at the woman and thanked her anyway. Goosebumps broke out on my arms, and I rubbed them. What was that about? I looked over the woman's shoulder and didn't see anything out of the ordinary. Nothing to my left, either.

But something was making me anxious.

“Excuse me,” I said to my companions. It was weird, I was just going to leave them, and there might be talk, but my senses were on high alert. I wasn’t going to be okay until I determined what it was that should have my attention. Patrice was okay. There’s Doug, in the corner talking to the governor... I counted all of my cousins and their spouses. Everyone was great.

So, what was...?

A hand touched my elbow and a deep, striking voice said my name. “Esther.”

I jerked around to see who had grabbed me and stopped short, my breath catching in my throat. It was him. Leader. In the flesh. *Here. In the governor’s house.*

When I could speak, which might have taken seconds or years, I managed to get out the word, “You,” in response to him.

He grinned. “Me,” he agreed.

I threw my arms around his neck, propriety be damned. He smelled exactly the same, even though he was wearing a tuxedo. Like the woods back on the Planet Wolf. *Wait a second.*

He was wearing a tuxedo.

I pulled back to look at him. He was the same, only cleaner. His hair had some sort of product in it, and he’d shaved. He was also absolutely fully clothed, including shoes.

“What are you doing here?”

Leader tilted his head to the side, in that considering way he did. “I’m here for you, of course.”

“For me?” I didn’t honestly know if anyone had really wanted to be anywhere for me before. “You... you came here? To Earth. To the governor’s house. For me?”

He cupped my cheeks. “Yes.”

“How did you know I would be here?” It wasn’t the most important question, but it was like my brain got stuck in a

loop. It was possible I was hallucinating this whole dang thing.

“When we got to this city earlier today, we heard some people talking about how your family was going to be here tonight. I don’t know who they were, but they happily sold us their tickets to come. A small woman and a dark-haired man and a blonde...”

I blinked. “Us.”

“Yes...” His smile was big. “I’m not alone.”

“No, he’s not.” I was in Hunter’s arms then. He squeezed me tight. “I knew I would find you. I am the best tracker in the universe. No one takes what is mine away. Took a little bit, because you weren’t supposed to be at the meeting, so I had to dig harder, but here you are.”

“And she’s okay,” Doc said as he took me from Hunter. “We have been so worried.”

They all wore tuxedos—all of them looking so real, so alive, so exactly what my eyes had wanted to look at right then. It was like my insides could take a deep breath.

“How?” I was still so confused, and I found myself even blinking back tears.

“Esther.” Doug was suddenly there. “Who are these people? What are you doing?” He spoke through gritted teeth. Were we making a scene?

Leader lifted his eyebrows as he assessed my cousin. It wasn’t a friendly glare. Doc still hadn’t let go of me, which made introductions even more awkward than it needed to be.

“Doug,” I managed to get out. “These are... *them*. The ones I told you about. The men who rescued me on Planet Wolf.”

He paled. “These are the shifters? Here? On Earth?” He lowered his voice. “It’s illegal.”

Hunter snorted. “They can try to remove us. I *dare* someone to try.”

It was Leader who spoke again. “And you are who to Esther?”

“Her cousin. We grew up together.”

Leader nodded as if it all made sense. “The one running for office that needs the money to fight the Union. Right. Your family. Fine.” A muscle ticked in his jaw. “Let’s try this again, I’m Jadon Haiges.” *Jadon!* His name was Jadon. “And these are my cousins, Carl Miles.” Hunter was *Carl!* “And Alfred Haiges. You are her oldest male relative, so please, come with me. We can discuss our mate someplace else.”

Leader... no, Jadon... stormed forward. Doug scampered after him like he’d just been given a command he absolutely couldn’t disobey. Carl rolled his eyes and walked after them, his pace fast as he stayed very close on my brother’s heels.

Alfred sighed. “It’s Alfie to people who matter. Obviously, that’s you.” His embrace was gentle. “Are you okay to walk?”

I blinked, trying to process it all. “Did he say mate?”

I knew I was a day late and a credit behind, but I was trying hard to keep up.

“Ah, yes,” Alfie smiled. I did always love his smile, and seeing it after missing him for so long lit fireworks inside me. “That’s not a thing you do here, so there are likely questions to answer.”

My mind swam. “But you—he—you think that’s what I am?”

We walked slowly after the others, more like a stroll. “I don’t think it, I know it. I realize you can’t tell, because your nose doesn’t work like mine does. You don’t have a Wolf, but we know what we know. You were and are such a surprise to us.”

I shook my head. “I’m mated to all of you?”

He nodded. “You are.” We made it outside, and the hot humid day had turned in a sultry, oppressive night. The sun going down hadn’t helped with that discomfort, it only made it darker.

“How does that even work?” Marriage on earth was one person to one person. It had been that way... always, so even imagining more baffled me. “And we don’t even know each other.”

He lifted his eyebrows slowly. “I think you know us.”

He was right, and something deep inside me knew it. I forced myself to swallow. “I gave you guys fake names in my head and... I’ve been feeling really lost... lonely, without you.”

Alfie’s gentle hold tightened a bit then he pulled me up against him, chest-to-chest. “Oh, Esther. Me too. So much. I’m the one who lost you. Not on purpose. I thought they were going to help you, and then you were gone. I’ve been the same as you. Lost. Lonely. Not okay. Not until right now.” He pressed his forehead to mine in a familiar manner. “What did you call me, out of curiosity?”

I closed my eyes and just breathed him in. Being his mate was ridiculous, wasn’t it? “Doctor. Or Doc, sometimes, for short. Are you that?”

“We’d say Healer, but yes. It’s close. That *is* what I am.” He took an audible breath. “And your scent is getting stronger by the minute. You’ve worn yourself out. Somehow you were stronger when we were in the middle of nowhere. Interesting. What is it that’s wrong with you? I couldn’t ever really tell.”

I shook my head. “Can that wait? It’s such a long answer. And this is so nice.”

He pressed my head against his chest. “Absolutely.”

It was funny, really, and not in a ha-ha way, which of his words sunk in and which ones still floated around in the stratosphere of confusion for me. I did, however, hold onto his proclamation that he missed me, too.

Somehow, that made what I'd been feeling so much easier to take. "You're here."

He hugged me tighter. "I've got you."

"Hey, you two." Hunter—Carl—came back over to us. "You okay? How did you get lost? Nose failing you, Cousin?"

Alfie groaned. "Very funny. Just talking for a minute. Don't be jealous because I'm getting a longer hug than you got."

"Oh, I'm going to get another hug. I'm going to get the longest hug of anyone. You wait." He laughed. "Come on. Jadon might kill your cousin, Esther. Is he really running for office to lead?"

"He is."

I was suddenly then in the middle of Alfie and Carl, each one on a side of me, and it was almost as though their energy gave me some, too. I sped up my walk a bit to keep up with them, and it wasn't even hard.

"He has no business in leadership."

That seemed like a funny thing to say. "How would you know that? He's bright and brilliant. He'd be better than the

Union.” That was when another truth hit me. “But you guys are aligned with the Union.”

“No,” Alfie interrupted. “We’re not. We were there to gather intel for leadership, for Jadon’s father at his behest. We do not align with the Union, though others on our planet do. They are traitorous pacts, and they are being dealt with, but they are not us.”

I let out the breath I was holding. “I’m so relieved.”

“I understand.” Carl grinned. “We thought we might have to convince you to switch alliances when we thought you were Union, too. And I’m sure your cousin is all those things, but he isn’t going to overthrow the Union. You don’t take down an entity like that with words and money. You take it down because that is what you do.”

That made no sense whatsoever. “I don’t think what you’re describing is possible. Of course you need to have speeches and words.”

“Maybe. But you really just need to have the will to do it.” Carl shrugged. “Trust me.”

“What was his name in your head?” Alfie asked me. “Carl’s? How did you label him?”

We arrived at a large house then which was near the governor’s mansion. Every light in the house was on, and we stopped outside of it. Were they staying nearby? I’d never noticed it before, but it was lovely—white siding and old Earth style. Beautiful, really.

“Um... Hunter. Because he was always getting the food.”

He touched his chest. “Is that how you thought of me? It fits.”

“He is what we would call an Enforcer. He makes sure what the Alpha ordered is done to standard. He runs any battles or violence that has to occur within the pack.”

I smiled. “The pack?”

“Our group,” Carl supplied with a half shrug. “Our family. For us, our roles in the pack aren’t just titles. We might all

have jobs—like, in addition to being the Enforcer, I’m also an attorney. But the Enforcer is who I am. It helps define me. It’s part of my soul.”

I had to wrap my head around the concepts, and it was foreign.

“What do you do for a living?” I asked Alfie.

He smiled. “I’m always a Healer. It’s a bit of an exception to the duality rule.”

“And that would make Jadon...?” I let my voice drift off to indicate it was a question.

“What did you call him in your head?” Alfie asked as an answer. A question for a question.

I swallowed. “Leader. It seemed you answered to him.”

He smiled slowly. “See? You did know us. Jadon is our Alpha. He *is* the Leader. He formed his own pack five years ago, and we went with him. We still have ties to his father’s pack, but yes, he is our leader. You couldn’t speak our language, yet you understood us perfectly. He’s the leader, the Alpha, and he’s also an engineer. But Alpha defines who he is.”

I really had understood them just from what I’d observed. That was sort of... amazing.

“Let’s go; he’s waiting.” Carl nodded toward the house and offered his hand, which I took without thought, lacing our fingers together.

Touching them like we’d done on their planet was so natural. Maybe that’s why they thought I was their mate. Of course, they said it had to do with their sense of smell, so something about my scent told them I was theirs? *I’m lost in this mess.*

But then I was inside the big, white house, and it was beautiful. My cousin stared at his feet in the main hallway as Jadon looked bored staring at the wall behind him. No... that was deceptive. He wasn’t the least bit lost to ennui. How did I

know that? I wasn't sure, but I sensed he was playing with Doug.

Any second, Jadon could become deadly. And what was more, my cousin's body language said he understood that. I'd never seen Doug look at his feet that way before.

Goosebumps broke out on my skin, and I rubbed my arms against the pain. Jadon looked over to meet my gaze. In that second, he wasn't threatening. In fact, he was anything but. He might as well have caressed me with the way his look moved through me. I wasn't at risk in any way, but that didn't mean that Doug wasn't.

I cleared my throat. "We grew up together. I have no family except for my cousins." It would have been weird for me to have said it, except I was sure he would understand what I was telling him. That he could read my gaze the same way I had his. I didn't want him to hurt my cousin. "Well, except for my mother, but she's locked away from here."

Jadon nodded once but Carl stared at me for a second. "Did she get sent to jail for something?"

"No, she's not mentally sound. She was sent to a floating space station that orbits the Earth where they take care of her, since there weren't any facilities here that could help her."

My cousin pointed at me. "See? She's making my case for me. First off, I can't just *give* her to you. There's no trade to be made. That isn't how it works here. Women decide what they want romantically. I'm not in charge of Esther's love life as the oldest living male in my family."

Jadon shifted his stance, widening his legs. "Then how do you handle unworthy males who might come with ill intent? You're rich. How do you stop them from coming after the females in your family for your wealth?"

My cousin shook his head then shrugged. "The women in my family are perfectly capable of figuring that out for themselves. Besides, Esther never likes anyone."

I didn't know why that made Jadon smirk, but he did. My cousin continued. "But she still can't be your so-called mate

and go live with you on your planet. She's not well. She's tough, strong, and she hangs on, but she is very sick. And there's a strong history of it. Her mother is, and I know this isn't going to be a kind way to say this, totally lost. She hasn't made a lick of sense in eighteen years, so she's somewhere where they can look after her. That is my point. Between Esther's health issues and what could be an upcoming degradation of her mind, I think, if anyone were asking me, that it's probably a terrible idea for her to do any more gallivanting about the universe."

My mouth fell open before I even knew I was going to speak. "You think I'm going to lose my mind? That I'm a walking time bomb that might explode any day into insanity?"

Doug lifted a single shoulder. "You have to know that's a possibility."

"I don't know any such thing. My head is screwed on just fine. I'm perfectly sane, and it sounds like you're not trying to convince me not to leave you so much as you're making a case about why they shouldn't want me."

He held up his hands as if to ward off my argument. "Look, I know that sounded shitty. I get it. But I just think they need to understand some things about you. It might make this whole thing go away and then we can go back to the status quo."

I had never lost my temper at Doug. In fact, I couldn't really remember losing it on anyone anytime. I usually had a pretty good leash on my anger, but it surged—maybe it was because I'd never let it loose before that I had no idea what to do with it.

Clenching my fists, I hollered at my cousin, "I think they have a pretty good idea who I am and what my issues are, since they experienced them over and over again in the woods after they *saved my life*. Maybe they should've let me die, since it seems you're so overwhelmed by my issues. Don't get me wrong, Doug, I'm grateful, but right now I just want to... I just want to rip out your throat. Are you actually telling the

men who crossed the universe to see me to go home without me? Why? So I can run your campaign?”

He paled. “I’ve really made you upset.”

“Yes, asshole, you have.” I stormed out of the house, my temper driving me to go—where? I had no idea, but somewhere. I couldn’t stay there a moment longer.

A hand grabbed my arm—Jadon. The other two were right behind him. His touch was gentle, a counterpoint to my fury. “He didn’t mean to hurt you, but that doesn’t negate what he said. I can see to it that he suffers, if you like. One word, and Carl will handle it.”

I swallowed. *Wow*. That was... an intense statement. It moved through me, cooling my temper. I knew, in that moment—maybe from the tone of his voice, maybe because I had always just seemed to know things about these three men—he meant every word. I could send Carl after Doug to make him pay for hurting me, if it was what I wanted.

The thing was, I had many, many more years of Doug loving me and not causing me pain to draw on than otherwise. Plus, I wasn’t going to use these men like some sort of weapon.

“I think he’ll beat himself up just fine without anyone else needing to help. By tomorrow morning, I bet he’s in my room, apologizing.”

Carl lifted his eyebrows. “He comes into your bedroom?”

“Not without knocking. Don’t make it weird. We’re like brother and sister. I told you, he’s my cousin.”

He shook his head slowly. “From now on, no one but us comes into your private bedroom. Any bedroom. That’s going to have to be the way it is.”

My mouth fell open. “So, you just assume you’re coming into my bedroom?”

His smile was slow. “Don’t argue just to argue, beautiful. You know we’re going to be in your bedroom.”

“Speaking of bedrooms,” Alfie interrupted. “I think we should get Esther back to hers so we can collect her stuff. We also need to make sure she’s had whatever medicine she needs.”

I blinked. “Where is my stuff going? I mean... I haven’t really agreed to *do* anything just yet. Talking to Doug about it is not the same as talking to me.”

Jadon held up his hands. “Fair enough. We do things differently on our planet. I needed to remember that and I didn’t. Would you consider coming to stay in the house we were just in with us? For now, we’ll start there and we can work up to you leaving the planet with us.”

“Can we... talk about all of this? Sit down and talk about things, so I understand them? I want to know what it means that you think I’m your mate, and... then we can talk about what, if anything, comes next?”

Jadon nodded once. “We can do that.”

“In the morning,” Alfie interjected. “We can all talk in the morning. It’s late and your scent tells me you’re tired. I don’t want you overdoing anything until I can better understand what’s happening with your condition. Come on, let’s get you home. If you don’t want to stay with us, we’ll stay with you.”

I gaped at him. No, he probably shouldn’t stay with me. I had a vision of them sitting around the breakfast table with my cousins, everyone staring at each other, and Doug shaking in the corner like a scared rabbit.

“I’ll come with you,” I said quickly.

Maybe I could have argued about how they needed to leave me alone and let me stay by myself, but I’d just gotten them back. I didn’t want to leave them. I’d missed them, and the hole that formed where they were supposed to be—it felt like it was filling up again.

“Good.” Alfie nodded. “Let’s go get your stuff.”



THE THREE WOLF shifters prowling around my bedroom were a strange sight. Jadon showed interest in the pictures I framed and hung around the room. They were mostly of my family, of various places we'd gone, and things we'd done. Carl helped me pack up some clothes, but I wasn't taking all of them. It wasn't like I officially decided to go anywhere other than their house for a night. It wasn't time to start packing boxes, and it might never be. The longer I sat with the idea of being their mate, the crazier it sounded. Despite what Doug said, I wasn't necessarily automatically on the train to become my mother.

But Carl kept bringing me things he thought I should have and sticking them in my suitcase.

Alfie remained preoccupied with my medicines. He looked at the bottles, wearing his translating glasses, and then sniffed the medicines as if his nose could tell him something the label didn't. Eventually, we were done.

Right at that moment, my very pregnant cousin Patrice burst through the door. Her mouth fell open as she stared at me. "Esther, tell me what is going on right this very second."

I motioned toward the guys. "These are the men that saved me. They've found me again."

She blinked rapidly and then stepped into the room. In a quick moment, she embraced Carl, who was closest to the door. "Thank you. I will never be able to thank you three enough."

"I prefer this cousin," Jadon said as he turned toward me.

She stepped back. "I'm too cumbersome to be hugging everyone, but consider that a hug from me to all of you. And you're incredibly thanked. I'm so grateful. But, now, what is happening?"

"I'm going to go with them to another house. Just for tonight. Then we're going to figure things out. They think... that is... erm, they think I'm their mate. I'm not sure entirely what that entails just yet. I know it would mean I had to go with them to their planet and leave here. Doug had some choice things to say about me leaving and my health, all of

them true, but hurtful. Stuff about why they shouldn't want me."

She shook her head. "Well, Doug can be an ass, and he tends to put his foot in his mouth when he doesn't have you telling him what to say."

That wasn't true... was it?

Patrice leaned over and kissed my cheek. When she spoke, it was a whisper in my ear. "You have to know what it means to be their mate. We had the same sex talk with Grandma. You don't need me to give you a quick reminder lesson, right?"

I snorted and covered my mouth. "No, I remember just fine. I'm not sure that's exactly on the table tonight. Love you. We'll talk tomorrow."

"I'm sure it's on the table." She winked at me. "Trust me on that."

"Congratulations on your baby." Alfie met her gaze. "Amazing, really, to see you walking around. So healthy. So able to do this."

"Is that unusual where you're from?"

"It is, unfortunately. As the instances of true mating declined, so did our fertility rates. The females who do get pregnant have a very rough time. So far along, a woman would be hospitalized and watched."

That sounded awful. "How long has it been like this?"

"Fifty years or so." Jadon scowled. "Packs are decreasing. It's a terrible struggle and one of the reasons our people are erupting to violence and dealing with the Union." He put out his hand to me. "It hasn't been a problem our best healers and scientists have managed to solve yet."

Alfie shook his head. "Because it's not a problem that's going to be solved. Our previous leaders screwed with the way we did things. When they ousted everyone from our planet, they changed the natural order of things. I can't explain exactly why that stopped Wolf mating Wolf, but it did. We

need to go back to how things were before. You're a perfect example of why."

I'd never been a perfect example of anything. "This is a lot to digest. And... for what should be obvious reasons, I should mention I can't have a baby. Among other things that are wrong with me, that is also a problem. If that makes you want to rethink the mate thing, then I understand."

It would hurt. I could already feel that hole coming back, if they decided it wasn't for them. But if the mating they spoke of had to do with procreating, then they were going to be out of luck when it came to me. It was just one of those factors of my life. Whatever made me sick, whatever the illness was that no one could identify, it also kept me from ever menstruating.

I wasn't going to be having their babies... or puppies? Or whatever it was that we'd call them, because I wasn't really sure how that worked. Did they come out in human form or as the Wolves?

It didn't matter. I wouldn't be having either.

Carl ran his finger down my cheek. "It's not only about making babies. If we can't have them, then we don't have them. It's about you and us. Whatever else happens, that's really all that matters."

They were sweet words, but I'd never known them to be true. If they changed their minds later, my body would be the same. "Maybe Doug was right..."

Jadon interrupted. "Whatever else Doug is, right is not on the list."

Patrice cracked up and my mouth fell open in surprise. Had I been the only one who didn't know Doug was problematic? "Why are we trying to get him elected if you feel that way?" I asked Patrice.

She shrugged. "Well, he'd be better than the Union, but I doubt it'll ever really happen."

"It's my sole purpose in life to get Doug elected before I die."

Patrice hugged me tightly. “Time for a new purpose. Besides, you had many purposes, ones you don’t even know you’ve been doing. Do any of us really know what our sole purpose is? Do we have *only* one? Oh, forget it. We are not going into this right now.” She yawned. “Goodnight. Have her back tomorrow, gentlemen. If you take her off planet before I have this baby, I am going to be very, very annoyed.”

Alfie lifted his eyebrows as she left the room. He turned to me. “She could lead a pack.”

“Is that a compliment?” I wasn’t sure.

Jadon laughed. “From Alfie, we can’t ever really be sure. Come on. I want out of this house before Doug comes home and I have to shift and kill him. I think that might upset my mate.”

He put his arm around me, and I let him lead me from the house. We walked through the night toward the house where they were staying.

The night was quiet, and I could hear the noise of our footsteps as though it was an important sound instead of just incidental to the experience.

“How do you like Earth? I mean... the bit you’ve seen so far?” I asked all three of them. “When I first landed on Planet Wolf, it didn’t seem real to me. Like it was just vast mountains in the distance we’d never reach.”

Carl cleared his throat. “Well, it could be that we delayed the return to the mountains a bit. Just a little bit. And only until we realized that you were really sick, and then we hurried up. But we didn’t want to leave you. Or to have to figure out how to share you with other people. It was like the woods were our own personal cocoon, and we wanted to stay there.”

I stopped walking. “So, what you’re saying is that the mountains weren’t quite so far.”

“Not quite so far.” Alfie took my hand in his. “As for Earth, I can only speak for myself. It’s noisy.” *Funny, because I was just thinking how completely quiet it was tonight.* “But I like it here because this is where you are.”

Shaking his head, Carl sighed. “I’d like it better if I was looking at it as we flew away. I don’t like it here because it feels like Earth is what is keeping me from taking you home.”

I blinked. “I haven’t said I’ll go with you away from here.”

“Ah, so the point is that I might as well get used to it, because we could be staying forever? Got it.” He winked at me. “I love Earth. It’s absolutely fantastic. Can’t think of anywhere else I’d rather be.”

I laughed, throwing my head back. He was funny. I wouldn’t have thought that, but maybe I should’ve. On the other planet, he was the one always smiling, always seemed to be having a good time.

“Are you upset that we made the trip take a little bit longer?” Jadon asked, as he deftly steered the conversation away from how they did or didn’t like Earth.

I turned to fully face him. “I’m not. I suppose I should be, but truthfully, even though I was very sick and had almost been blown up, it was the best time of my life. Ever. So, no I’m not upset. Not at all. I wish it could’ve gone on forever.”

For just a second, his gaze turned wolfish again. He hadn’t done that since arriving here earlier. I watched as it faded back to his human eyes. “That’s the mating, beautiful. Do you think you would’ve felt that way otherwise? You were almost blown up, then dragged around for days by three men who should have gotten you home earlier, before you had a seizure. Would you really have enjoyed that otherwise? Sleeping in a cave? The snow?”

There had been a lot of uncomfortable parts of our trip, sure, but there were things that weren’t, too. “Actually, it was like the sun was just better there, if that makes sense. It warmed my skin, made me feel better in between all the other things that happened to us. So, yes, I see what you’re saying and, yes, you’re right. It was mostly you three. Yes.”

Did that mean I was mated to them? I didn’t hate the idea.

The house was still lit up completely when we arrived, which made sense since no one had turned the lights off when we left. “How did you get this place?”

We stepped inside, and Carl shut the door behind us. With a snap, I heard him lock it. *I’m now inside an empty house with three guys whose names I just officially learned...* Yet I wasn’t the least bit bothered or intimidated by being alone with them. We’d survived in the woods together and the house offered far more comfortable surroundings. I was safe—that much I knew—if nothing else.

“We rented it.” Jadon said then he dropped a kiss on my forehead. “It feels better now that you’re here in it with us.”

“I was able to do it before we ever landed,” Carl said as he smiled at me. “Easy to break into systems, create identities. All of it was simple. We knew this was the same district you lived in. Had no idea until we got here that it was so close.”

My head swam and my knees threatened to give out. Alfie grabbed me, tugging me close against him. “You’re okay. It’s been a lot tonight.”

“I’ve been weaker since I got back.” I’d told him as much already, but the others hadn’t heard.

Jadon wiped my hair away from my forehead. “We all have. The separation from you became physically painful for us, too. I imagine it’s been worse on you, since you weren’t well. That will be our primary focus, wherever we are. Getting you better.”

“That focus would be a futile waste of time.” I shook my head as it cleared a little bit. “I’ve been sick since birth.” When I spoke, it was to Alfie. I’d put him off, but we might as well rip off the proverbial bandage and get it done. “Technically, I was four years old, but the doctors think I was born with the condition. They can’t really explain my symptoms.” I touched my watch. After my jaunt off planet, Doug thought I should always carry my medical information with me. “It’s in here. I can transfer all of the info to you, if you can take it this way.”

Alfie put out his hand. “Give me the device. I’ll get the information off it.”

That made the most sense. *Let him have at it.* I didn’t even look at the time on my wrist, I just handed it over to him. Carl scooped me up. “Well, enough of today. You’re going to go to sleep where we can know you’re safe. In an actual bed. With no caves or dirt involved.”

“I really didn’t mind that cave at all.” That was the truth. “The ground never seemed hard. I was loopy from that leaf, though, so maybe that contributed.”

Alfie laughed. “It completely did. Those leaves are wonderful at negating negative drug reactions. They’re natural sedatives that also clear the system temporarily. You can’t live on them permanently or they become less effective until they stop working altogether. I thought...”

Carl groaned, whirling me around in his arms. “I think she gets it. We were all there. She lived. You were right, they worked.”

Alfie held up his hands. “Yes, okay. No more medicine talk before bed. How are we dividing?” He looked at Jadon, his deferral making sense to me now. Jadon really was their leader.

“I’ll watch. I don’t like this place. I want a sense of it. You stay with her, Carl. Alfie needs to study her records. He’ll watch inside the house.”

Alfie nodded. "Right." He kissed my cheek. "Go, get some rest. I'll be by to check on you, if that's not too weird. I can't help it. I have to."

Carl kissed my cheek, and my skin heated up. *Wait a second, he is going to stay with me.* Before I could even ask, he whirled me around again. "I told you I was getting the longest hugs."

"Esther," Jadon said as he took a step toward me. "We almost lost you several times. We'd just scented you when everything exploded. Somehow, we all lived, then you were suddenly sicker. It seemed like you were just slightly off and then..."

Alfie held up his hand. "No medical stuff or I'm going to get into it again, too."

Jadon grinned at him. For an Alpha relationship, he didn't seem to mind them teasing him. I sort of loved it. What were all the dynamics?

"The point being, we lost you, but we have found you again. You will not be taken from our side. If we stay here, so be it. Maybe I can move the pack to Earth. If I can't, then they'll reform without us. My mate comes first."

"We're getting a little bit ahead of ourselves here. I haven't agreed to be your mate or anything else like that. Also, shifters forming a pack here probably won't work. It's illegal."

Carl shook his head. "There are plenty of shifters on Earth. You guys just have no idea. Never mind that for now, though. Are you hungry?"

Was I hungry? "No. I don't think so. I sometimes don't notice, but I ate dinner tonight. I'm not particularly hungry."

They all nodded. "We didn't do a good job keeping you fed. I imagine there will be plenty of things you can eat here." Alfie held up my watch. "I'll be back later, after I've dived into this."

Jadon kissed my cheek and took a deep breath against my neck. "Good night, Esther. I've dreamed of this. I know we all have. The things that concern you tonight might not tomorrow

or the next day. Time tends to handle a lot of pain. Now that we're all together, things will sort themselves out."

I believed him. In that second, I did. My anxiety would likely rush back, but in that moment, Jadon could have told me the sky was green, and I would've believed him. *That must be why he has his role and why they all listen to him.*

Carl ended up setting me into a big room in the corner of the house. He stopped to look in various doors when we got to the top of the stairs before he settled on the "right" one. "Stay here, please." He winked at me. "Going to get your stuff."

"Why did you pick this one?" I stopped him at the door. "As opposed to any of the other rooms."

Carl scratched his head. "I liked this one strategically. If I had to protect it, this would be the easiest room for us to get you out, either via the stairs or through the window. We're further from the street if we go out the window, so I like the idea of escaping with you out the back door. Don't get me wrong, I would first kill any intruders, but in the case of a siege..."

I held up my hand. "There won't be a siege to get me. I'm not very important."

"You are the most important female—woman—that has ever been born," he disagreed. He invaded my space then, kissing me hard. Our lips danced together. I remembered the way he kissed from the woods. Carl hadn't cared at the time, and he obviously had no problem with kissing me right now, either, although Alfie hadn't liked it then. As suddenly as he started kissing me, he stopped, breathing in my neck in the way that the guys seemed to like to do. "I'm going to kiss you all night or until you fall asleep against me. When you wake up, I'll be there to do it again. Kiss and fucking kiss you."

I caught my breath. "We didn't even talk about you sleeping in here. I just went along with it. I'm not a person who just goes along with things."

His smile was slow. "We can discuss it, if you want, but you know you've missed us next to you in bed. Not that we

ever really had a bed. Just the ground. But we've missed you and thought about this. About the way you'd feel on some soft, sweet smelling sheets. You're such a silent sleeper. You don't make a sound. I want to be pressed right against you all night, so I can hear the inhales and exhales. Feel your heartbeat."

My pulse sped up at the thought. "Yes." My voice was low, almost scratchy sounding. "I've missed you next to me."

I was answering an earlier question, not what he'd just said. It was like my brain short circuited. I couldn't think straight, couldn't think of anything other than how much I wanted him to touch me.

"Good." His smile was huge. "Stay here a second. I'll be right back with your things."

My things? That was right. I'd packed a bag. I walked over to the window. Yes, I needed to breathe and look outside. I could clear my head, if I just...

Carl was back fast, placing the bag on the floor next to the bed before he walked over to me and slid his arms around me from behind. He drew me against him, against his heat. I felt his deep breath move through me like he'd caressed my whole body. I loved how he always seemed to want to breathe me in. It had to be a Wolf thing. What could he scent on me? Someday, I would ask, but right now, I had more important concerns. The thought stirred my brain. When did I start thinking there would be a someday for me? I could never even count on there being a tomorrow.

"What do you smell when you sniff me like that?" I asked him. There I was, back on track. Living for the moment, trying to get things done while I still could.

He didn't answer right away; instead, he took another breath. My insides were officially hot now. Melting. "I can smell that you're tired. That you're happy, albeit a little bit concerned about things. Slightly overwhelmed, and in the middle of all of that is your scent, the one that is purely you. The one that tells me you're my mate, and that you exist in the world, and that all I need to exist is to be wrapped up in you."

I turned in his arms. I wasn't really looking at the sky anymore anyway. I clung to his shirt and avoided his eye contact. So close, it would be too much to say what I had to say if I looked at him. "Makes me worried to hear you say that. I might not be here tomorrow. That's been a truth for my whole life. I'm not well. The doctors are always skeptical about my future."

He picked me up, carrying me over to the bed. "Give that stress to Alfie now. He's very, very smart."

"I've had very smart people look at me before. There aren't any answers. I can't stand to think that your entire existence involves whether or not I'll be here. What if I'm not?"

I let myself look at Carl finally. My Hunter. The one who always showed up with whatever I needed, even before he could understand what I said verbally. "I will not believe that we could lose you so fast after finding you. And I do believe that Alfie can fix it. I've seen him do incredible things, and he will never be as motivated as he is right now."

He tugged on my shirt. "Do you sleep in your clothes, or do you have something different you change into?"

My cheeks got so warm, I had to be bright red. "I change." I pointed at the bag. "I can do that in the bathroom."

He leaned down on the bed like he was lazy. It was deceptive. No way would this man ever really let down his guard. He could jump at any time. Although I might like it if he did—right on top of me. I wouldn't tell him that, though, because it would be too much... somehow. I had no experience with intimacy. I might as well have been five years old again and trying to figure out how to get people who weren't my cousins to play with me. I'd always been sort of socially stupid.

"Or you could let me watch you get undressed," he suggested.

He saw me naked at the waterfall, but I'd been too gross to stop and think about decency when I flung my clothes off that

day. I scooted off the bed. “I’d really like to. I’m obviously very attracted to you. You can probably even... scent that.” Which was disturbing, if I let myself think about it too much. “But, anyway, I’ve never done anything like *this*. I mean, ever. And I’m embarrassed.” He probably could smell that, too, now that I thought of it. That somehow made things even worse. “Borderline scared.”

Carl scooted over toward me and finally rose from the bed. “You can’t know how hot that is, to hear that you have never stripped down in front of anyone before? But I don’t want you scared or embarrassed. This wasn’t some kind of test to see if you’d do it, and there is nothing better than you being honest about how you feel. We don’t lie unless we have no respect for someone. Then we lie so they smell it and know that we don’t.”

I tried to follow his logic, but my thoughts were stuck on the taking off my clothes issue.

He tugged me to him. “What if I took off your clothes for you? Hmm?” I liked how he followed the question with the small noise that moved right through me. “Then you can change into your pajamas, and I’ll get to the kissing you part, which is all I can think about. If that’s too much, we won’t kiss, either. You’re my mate. I have all the time in the world to see you take off your clothes in front of me, so you don’t have to rush if you’re not ready.”

I could have argued with him—when it came to me, there might not be all the time in the world. He knew it, and what was more, I could honestly say he was completely aware of my issues. He’d seen them firsthand.

It was sweet, though, that he thought we had that kind of time. I wasn’t going to argue about it right then. I backed up a step. “I try to do things that scare me... like getting on a shuttle to a planet I should not be visiting to spy on evil corporations. And taking off my clothes in front of a man who says that I’m mated to him and his cousin and his friend.”

His mouth twitched, but he asked, “Why do you think you need to do things that scare you? As much as I’ve benefited

from this strange statement—I would otherwise never have met you, after all—I’d also rather not think of you running around scared all the time.”

“Because I’ve spent most of my life looking through windows at other people living theirs. When I can do something a little scary, I try to do it.”

That included taking off my clothes. With shaking hands, I unzipped my dress from behind and let it pool to the floor by my feet. I stepped out of it. I was skinny, always had been. My curves were small, whether from my health issues or just naturally how I was meant to look, no one could tell me. I was happy with myself, for the most part. I didn’t have a lot of time to be physically critical of my outsides when I was so constantly concerned with the workings of my insides.

Besides, it didn’t matter right then, not with the way Carl watched me. He sank back down on the bed and leaned on his elbows. His gaze was heated, caressing. He said all he was going to do was watch me and kiss me. Goosebumps broke out on my body. Would it be possible to ask him for more? Or was that a very, very bad idea?

I couldn’t chicken out, not when I’d taken back control of our interaction. Oh sure, he’d been the one to move it this way, but I’d reasserted the idea that I could handle things. That was important for my self-confidence and because I didn’t want this Wolf shifter, this enforcer, this person who said I belonged to him, to think I couldn’t handle what he dished out.

I could.

I smiled at him slowly while I dropped my bra to the floor around my dress. “Am I living up to what you remembered?”

He visibly swallowed. “Esther, it is taking every ounce of willpower to resist tugging you over here and taking you again and again. You were then, and are now, the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen on *any* planet.” He nodded toward me. “Keep going. I’ll fantasize about you totally naked for the rest of my life. All the days of my life, I will remember this moment.” His eyes flashed wolfish again. It should startle me, but it only reminded me of our trek across the mountains

together. Carl was a caretaker, and he wasn't going to hurt me. His gaze was nothing but warm when he looked at me, every time, without fail. Wolf or not. I slipped out of my panties.

Carl held out his hand, offering for me to take it. "You can leave the pajamas off, if you'd like to sleep naked."

"Would you rather I slept naked?"

His smile was fast. "I'd rather you do everything naked. There isn't anything I'd rather see than you naked doing anything all the time. Except that would mean other people besides my cousin and my best friend would see you, and for that, I'd have to kill them. So, for tonight, I'd like you to sleep naked pressed up against me after I've kissed you for hours."

I swallowed. "This is not the day I thought I was going to have."

His smile grew and he rose and, in his slow, controlled stride, closed the distance between us. My body buzzed like I was plugged into a socket conducting electricity through me, my every nerve ending sparking with sensation.

Carl touched my cheek, cupping it beneath his large hand. "I always find what I lose. I am the best tracker in the galaxy. Despite that, I have to admit, Mate, that when you vanished from our lives, I had a moment where I wondered if you were real or if I imagined you. But you are. So, very real. I love knowing there will come a day when you will be so used to my touch, you'll start to get wet when I walk in a room, because you'll know I'm going to touch you and stroke you until you come on my fingers. Every chance I get."

I caught my breath. No one had ever spoken to me like that before. Never. And I wanted more. He drew me down on the bed, and I went willingly. My heart raced, but for once I didn't mind. Carl rolled me over until he was on top of me; his weight was slight as he bore most of it on his elbows.

"I know this is too fast. I know this isn't how I should be behaving tonight. But this is me. I couldn't resist you in the woods, and I can't now, either." He kissed me. I closed my eyes and drowned in his kiss.

Carl kissed and kissed me, as promised. His lips were soft. For a person as hard as he was, his mouth tasted sweet and giving. I opened my eyes to find his were closed, his expression lost in passion. I didn't know why seeing his face helped me to relax more, but it did. The fact that he was as lost as I was went a long way to give me permission to fall further down the spiral. Yeah... I was weird. I knew it, but he really seemed to like me anyway.

With a slight moan, he let go of my lips to kiss both my cheeks. I closed my eyes. *This might be easier if I didn't watch.*

“Esther, open your eyes and look at me for one moment.”

I lifted my lids. “Was I doing something wrong?”

“No. You could never do anything wrong when it comes to kissing me, but I can smell that you're nervous. There is no need for you to worry. This is just the two of us getting to know each other. Our courtship was done without understanding each other's languages, yet we still learned so much about each other. You figured out who I was. I learned who you were, too.”

I hadn't asked them what they thought of me. Maybe I hadn't wanted to know. “What did you discover about me?”

“That you are strong, resilient. That you keep going when most people would fall apart. That you have a huge heart and watch what others are doing all the time. You're observant. Funny. Smart. Now that we can talk, I can also see that you're

sensitive and kind. You have a temper that you don't use very often, but aren't afraid to pull out."

I caught my breath. "I wouldn't list those things as being who I am. I'd say... sick and trying."

He frowned. "I am not dismissing your illness, not at all. But I want you to know that, when we scent you, your ailment, whatever it is, is not the first thing we smell. You smell of health to me." He breathed deeply. "But I can smell your pain, and that you hurt and ache. I would take that from you, if I could, but obviously I can't. To the point, know the way that I think of you is not first and foremost sick and trying."

It would be so easy to love this man. My heart stuttered at the thought. Wow. That had come out of nowhere. Or maybe not. I was naked in bed with him. Obviously, my feelings for him were intense. Were they love? Well, I'd mourned his loss like a death I'd never get over, so they were something.

"When you were gone..." My voice caught as I tried to speak. The emotion of it was almost too much, clogging my throat. He didn't rush me, just tilted his head as he regarded me. Just because he could smell my emotions, it didn't mean he understood why I had them.

Finally, I found my voice again. "It was like the world ceased. I woke up, and my family didn't know who any of you were. I had to convince myself I wasn't crazy, that you had existed. And then it was suggested that, although you saved me, maybe you were just being nice and maybe that it hadn't meant to you what it did to me. There was so much pain."

He furrowed his brow and then shook his head. I could watch the thoughts crossing over his face in rapid succession. "I knew you existed, and I could find you, but it took too long. I knew you were suffering without us and that you couldn't get to us even if you had the means since humans are not allowed to simply arrive." He caressed my face. "All of that to say I missed you a tremendous amount. It burned, an ache I could not fill. Please, never feel nervous about anything with me, because although no one is perfect, you are as close to perfect as anyone could be in my eyes."

I wrapped my arms around his neck. “I... I believe you. I shouldn’t. This is nuts, but I do.”

Maybe he scented that my nerves finally fled, because he kissed me then like he owned me—or at least that he wanted to be owned by me. Yes, that was what he wanted, and I couldn’t have explained how I knew it. I just did. It wasn’t a claiming; he wanted me to claim him.

Carl was tough, but he was soft inside... at least where it came to me. He’d found me and traveled the universe to get to me.

Fuck my nerves.

I kissed him back, practically taking over the experience. Now, he followed me. I wanted his lips, and I wanted them everywhere, not just on my own.

I lifted my head. “Does it have to be just kissing?”

The head tilt again. “What did you have in mind?”

“The whole deal. Um, having sex.” Much as I’d found my confidence, I wasn’t used to saying *sex*. It was one of those words we just didn’t use very much, a private word. Although, I supposed with Carl, I was absolutely supposed to use it.

His smile was adoring. “Do you think I’d ever say no to sex with you? But it’s early. Are you sure you want to? I am happy to wait forever for you. Just to be with you is more than I ever thought to have.”

My mouth watered. “I’ve never wanted sex—I mean *ever*, but I do with you. Right now. All of the sudden, even if it’s fast. I don’t have the luxury of thinking long term, and I don’t want to miss out on anything with you.”

“I both love and hate that.” He kissed me, biting my lip. “Few things happen with Wolf shifters. When we are officially together, I will, apparently, be filled with the absolute need to mark you, to bite you somewhere. I’ve never had that experience... except when I kiss you or touch you, I can feel it in my gums. The need to mark you. I don’t want it to scare you, I’ll just have to. And not just me, it’ll be Jadon and Alfie, too. They’ll have the same urge.”

I'd never wanted to be bitten, and it didn't sound great, but if it was part of being with him, so be it. I wanted Carl, bite and all. "Well... hopefully it won't hurt too badly."

"I never want to hurt you." He kissed my neck. "I'll do my best."

Carl kissed down my body, stopping at the part of my neck that made me squirm. I didn't know that I had a spot, but apparently it was right there. He kissed it again. "I think I know where I'm going to bite you."

After that, we were done talking. He kissed and I squirmed. Every kiss and touch, I got hotter and hotter. I needed his skin, and I needed it touching my own. We pulled off his clothes together, both of us panting. His gaze darted everywhere, like he wanted to take me in as desperately as I needed to see him. We rolled around—he was on top and then I was. I was dizzy and starved for his touch when he finally put his finger inside of me. Wet and needy, I was ready to beg him for more.

He swirled his finger over my clit until my muscles clenched around him. I didn't know what I needed, but he had to give me more than that. Carl seemed to know. He added a second finger, and soon I writhed, crying out, losing all sense of anything except the pleasure he gave me. I kissed his chin, anywhere I could as I continued to vibrate. I trembled with need. That was amazing but it wasn't enough. It wasn't what I'd told him I wanted.

I knew it and he did, too.

With an ease I was glad he felt, because I absolutely was not, he fit himself inside of me. I'd never done this before, ever. But in that moment, it was like we'd known each other intimately forever. *Almost as if it were meant to be.* No, I wouldn't go there, not when I could revel in so much pleasure. Destiny could wait for another day. *Another time. Never.*

I held on while he took me to someplace I'd never been before. How could I have known what it really meant to be joined? Our bodies, yes, but our souls as well. We were wrapped in each other and would always be.

Pleasure was a small wave gaining momentum. The orgasm he'd given me with his finger built and exploded, but this one wavered, stopped, and started again. He closed his eyes, his neck muscles clenching. "This is so much more than I imagined it could be. It is everything I ever needed in life. You are magic, my magical mate."

Carl spoke words as beautiful as what he did to my body. With a gasp upon hearing him, I came. Softly at first and then harder, like the wave of pleasure itself. He growled a sound before his mouth came down on my neck then he bit me. The pain surged another round of pleasure through me as I fought the need to bite him, too. I had no fangs. It wasn't going to work. There was sadness to it that fled quickly. I wanted to reciprocate—strange, but I couldn't dwell on it. Carl licked my wound closed, and then lifted his head.

"That was..."

I touched his cheek. He was still deep inside of me. "Everything."

He nodded once. I had been skeptical, but there might be something to the idea of being mated. My neck throbbed a little as a wave of tiredness hit me. "Sorry, I... I am suddenly exhausted."

"It's been a long day. You're not suddenly exhausted; you've *been* exhausted. I'm supposed to be letting you sleep. I will hear about this from Alfie, but I have no restraint with you. I can never resist." He gently pulled out of me. "I'm going to hold you, now. All night and into the morning, so rest, you beautiful woman. You are with me, body and soul now."

I was, but I'd dwell on what it meant exactly when I could think again.



I'D NEVER BEEN SO comfortable in my life when a gentle hand touched my shoulder. "Esther." Alfie's voice. The Doctor. I

smiled, not opening my eyes. No, I liked wherever I was. *Pleasant. Warm. No pain.*

“Is it really necessary?” Carl spoke low. “She’s happy being asleep.”

“And you’re happy being pressed against her. I get it.” Alfie tried again. “But she’s going to want to see the message from her cousin that’s coming through her watch. I’d never wake her otherwise, but their relationship is close. We can all smell that. So, yes, it’s necessary.”

I wrenched my eyes open. “Yes, watch please. Whatever it is that Patrice wants, if she’s messaging in the middle of the night, I need to see it.” I rubbed my eyes. “Assuming it’s the middle of the night?”

Carl leaned against me, lounging, totally naked. He didn’t seem particularly worried about moving right then. “You’ve been asleep about an hour.”

“You weren’t?” I grabbed the watch and started reading as he answered me.

“Too busy basking in what a lucky bastard I am.”

In labor, my cousin wrote, and trapped in the house. The Union is here blocking streets. I don’t know what’s going on.

I jumped from pseudo-stupor toward the end of the bed. Alfie grabbed my arm. “Let’s go help your cousin. We’ll get her somewhere safe to have that baby. There aren’t blockades that keep Wolf shifters contained if we don’t want to be, but let’s be smart about it.”

I grabbed for my clothes before I realized I didn’t want my dress. No, I had to change. I grabbed my suitcase and pulled on the pants and shirt I’d meant to wear the next day. My hair went quickly up in a messy bun. Carl must have dressed, because when I turned around, he wore jeans and a shirt but I didn’t have any sense of him doing it. Both men stared at me with such awe, I had to glance in the mirror to make sure I hadn’t done anything weird.

Finding nothing, I slipped on my shoes. “Let’s go.”

“Right.” Alfie nodded. “Come.” He put out his hand, his thumb stroking my fingertips. “His mark looks good on you. I’m already picturing my own.”

My family was going to think I had the weirdest hickey in history. I shot another glance at it in the mirror. It was red and raw, but it would probably fade until it was just noticeable to me and anyone close to me.

For the moment, however, everyone would know that someone had bitten me.

Alfie sniffed me, pressing his head against my own, and closed his eyes for a second. “You’re so beautiful.”

I smiled at him. There was clearly no jealousy about anything that had gone on with Carl and me. Of course, if they all mated in groupings, they really couldn’t have those feelings. For my part, I was just as attracted to Alfie as I had been before. Maybe even more so, since I had a sense of exactly how wonderful it could be to do what Alfie likely wanted to do with me.

Carl cut in front of us, going out of the door first before a thought dawned on me. “Jadon doesn’t know what’s happening.”

“Oh.” Alfie smiled. “He will in seconds. I can guarantee he knew the second you stepped one foot out of the house. Yes, see? There he is.”

Like he stepped out of the darkness, Jadon walked toward us. He’d been totally unseen by me in the shadows. Faster than I would’ve expected, he was in front of us. With a glance at my neck, he turned his attention to Alfie and Carl. “What’s happening?”

“We have to get to her house. Her cousin is in labor, and the Union is putting up barricades,” Carl filled him in, looking left and right. “Switch with me. I’ll go ahead.”

Jadon nodded before smiling at me. “How exciting. A baby. Such a gift.”

True enough, although it was the second part of the problem that really had me confused. “Why are the Union

putting up barricades?”

“Not sure. They’re not here yet, so they didn’t catch my attention. I promise you, I’ll find out. Do they usually not interfere here?”

I shook my head. “No, this is the rich part of town. They leave us alone.”

Jadon nodded. “Despicable but not surprising. Come. Carl found a path. We’ll walk it too.”

Alfie let go of my hand to run ahead, leaving Jadon with me. He put his hand in mine, and I tried to keep up. They’d gotten really great at bringing me along in the woods, and I fell back into step easily. I was probably frustratingly slow, but Jadon made no mention of it.

Finally, after dodging sight from trucks and avoiding checkpoints, we arrived at my house. “Do they know you’re here?” I whispered to him.

He shook his head. “No. They really don’t. This has nothing to do with us. They’re looking for someone, but it isn’t us.”

“They’re missing someone.” Carl appeared as silently as Jadon had earlier. “An executive has gone missing. They think he’s somewhere nearby looking for you, Esther.”

What? I startled. “Why would he be looking for me?”

“I don’t know, but I broke into their system and saw their orders. They know you went out tonight. They’re hoping to find the executive before he makes contact with you, but if they don’t, then they want to waylay you on your way home to stop you from talking to him.” He nodded toward the house. “Patrice doesn’t know how to get to the hospital through this. Alfie went in. He couldn’t help himself. She’s in distress. The healer couldn’t stand it.”

I rushed forward, making it through the back door. The house was quiet—it always was at night, except for the sounds coming from upstairs. Someone was crying, and I didn’t have to be a genius to guess it was Patrice. My stomach tightened.

I'd heard labor hurt, but surely, she couldn't be expected to have her baby at home.

We had babies in hospitals on Earth for the most part. Not in people's houses.

She was in her room, and Alfie was with her. He looked over his shoulder when we entered. "This baby is coming."

Both Patrice and her husband made the same sort of yell of the word *what* before Patrice followed it up with another cry. Alfie nodded his head. "Yep. Baby is coming fast for the first one. You're having it right here, but I'm going to take good care of you."

I was hustled from the room then. Patrice wanted her husband with her in the hospital, since our family could be a lot to manage when she was feeling wonderful. The only way to not insult anyone was to have no one but her husband there, even though she'd told me weeks ago she would've loved for me to be there, too. I understood. We had to be diplomatic a lot.

Jadon grinned at me. "She's going to be fine. Alfie's been helping women give birth for a hundred years."

I stared at him, the low rumble of everyone talking around me a background noise that I was used to, even if it was a totally novel experience to have the guys there with me. "How old are you guys, anyway?"

"We're all one hundred and thirty years old." He smiled, which made him look younger, like he was about thirty. "Much older than you, I know."

I walked toward him. I'd never be able to pinpoint why I knew he needed a hug, but I did. I wrapped my arms around him and put my ear against his chest. He seemed to sigh against me, his head coming down on my head. "You okay?"

"I will be. Eventually. I'm better than I've ever been but not quite where I need to be yet. The Union looking for you... that executive. It's not okay. They think you're not here, or they'd be trying to haul you out right now. We have to get out

of here before they do, but I'd never rush you from your family."

I lifted my head. "How did they decide you were in charge? That you were Alpha? The group decides or whatever?"

"No one really decided. It just was."

I was officially never going to understand. That was okay. I went back to listening to his heart beat. I had no suggestions about what to do about his quandary. I wasn't leaving here until Patrice's baby was safely in her arms. Then we could figure out what to do next.

He whispered in my ear. "His mark looks good on you, but I know just where mine will go. Also, if I had known it was on the table, and we weren't just leaving you to sleep, I'd have taken the first night with you. I'm not great at waiting."

I smiled against him. "And here I thought you guys didn't do jealousy."

He chuckled. "We do it lovingly."

I had no idea what that meant, but I didn't get to ask because we all heard the baby cry out at the same time. Tears flowed unrestrained down my face. I hadn't even seen him yet. We knew it was a boy, since scans had shown us early, but I knew that I loved him, and that was just an amazing facet of life. I loved this person I'd never met.

Alfie came out, a smile on his face. "Mom and baby are doing great."

Jadon wiped my tears, and soon baby Drew was meeting his entire extended family—loudly and with tears and laughter. Sometimes having a big family was a burden, and sometimes it was a blessing. Maybe it was both to Patrice right then.

But her baby was beautiful. He was all red and scrunched up, screaming until he was fed and then crying again for no reason anyone could tell. Eventually, we left the new parents alone. I bent over to kiss my cousin.

"I might have to go."

She took my hand in hers. “I know. They’re looking for you, that’s what I heard. Or something like that. I think you *should* go. Let them take you back to that place. Now that you can talk to them... it might be better. Things here are not great. They never were, and they’re getting worse. We’ll probably make a move, now that the baby is here. I don’t know where to, but the good news is we live in a time when, even if we’re living on different planets, we’ll never be out of touch.”

By the time she finished, we were both crying. I kissed her again. “Your baby is gorgeous.”

“I know.” She brightened up. “Of course he is.”

I did love my cousin.



I NO SOONER STEPPED OUTSIDE AND told Jadon I wanted to leave, to go with him, than Carl had retrieved my stuff. We were headed toward their hidden shuttle—hidden in the sense that no one knew it belonged to Wolf shifters—when I spotted him.

The man in the rumpled suit who was watching me as we passed. He hid partially behind a tree.

“I see him, too.” Alfie spoke to me, since Jadon and Carl were ahead and behind us. “I bet that’s the guy. Stay here.”

I stopped moving, as though I were used to him giving me orders and just obeying him, which had pretty much been true on our trek together. Even though I hadn’t understood everything he wanted right then, I did listen to Alfie. Oh, who was I kidding? I listened to all of them.

He approached the man, stopping in front of him to speak to him. Carl backed up to stand next to me.

“He’s safe. He does want to talk to you. Briefly. And I think the way the Union is patrolling badly, we can get away with it. Come on.” He touched the small of my back and brought me over to where Alfie waited.

“Ms. Espenson?” He spoke in a low voice. “I’ve been looking for you.”

Jadon didn’t join us, but I could feel him behind me. His eyes focused on us as if it might allow him a better means upon which to strike. “So I’ve heard. How can I help you, Mr...?” I let my voice trail off to indicate it was a word I didn’t know.

“James. My name is Edward James. I have something you want.” He held out a folder.

I stared at it then looked at Alfie. If it had explosives or something, he would be able to smell it, wouldn’t he?

He nodded, and I took it from the man. “Why are you giving this to me?”

“Because you have a history of getting the truth out there about the Union. I know you’ve heard from the woman on the Cat planet. This is from some of the Bear people. And more things. The Union is going to destroy everything. Do something with this.”

With that line delivered, he took off running.

Everything I’d tried to do up until then was futile, so I didn’t know why he thought I could do anything at all.

Their shuttle was much nicer than any I'd ever used. That was my first thought as I boarded it, with the folder in my hand, and looked around. My second thought was darker. *Am I nuts to be doing this?* They were Wolf shifters, and I'd spent a lot of time with them, but I hadn't understood a word they said most of the time. My hand traveled to where Carl bit me. The touch hurt but also sent thrills through my body. It might as well have been him biting me again. I clenched my thighs at the memory.

Alfie walked behind me, running his finger up my spine until he touched the bare skin of my neck. "I can't wait until you can do that to where I bit you." He smiled before he leaned over and kissed me. "In the meantime, since we have to get into space and avoid the Union noticing, I want to just sit with you. Can't have you naked and where I want you and then find out that they need me to help pilot."

He kissed my cheek, and I leaned into him. How could I resist? Alfie was like bathing in light, there was just the sense that he'd take care of anyone around him, but he wanted to take care of me the most. Did I get to be happy about that? Yes, I guessed I did. I sat down at a small table but then it occurred to me that I should ask. "Is this okay?"

"Yes," Alfie sank into the chair next to me. "Yes, this is the dining area, although we didn't particularly gather to eat on our way here. We can eat together if you're willing. I actually love the idea."

That was sweet. I stared at the folder in my hand as if it were a loaded weapon. “I should look at it, right? I mean he sought me out, so whatever is in here has really scared the Union. We’re running away because of it. I just don’t want to know, if I’m being honest.”

Did that make me a coward?

Alfie shook his head as the shuttle rose into the air. Either Jadon or Carl must be piloting it. I should go look. For the moment, I was just comfortable. “We’re not running. Don’t even suggest that. We don’t run; we’re fighters, all three of us. We are protecting our mate, but we will kick them from here to the end of the universe if they threaten you. In fact, we expect to have to fight them soon, but not because of you. We were gearing up for that when we went to that meeting.”

They were, although I knew very little about that day. “Why were you there?”

“Jadon’s father sent us. He’s anti-Union. We pretended we weren’t. Jadon has his own pack, but we are still attached to his father, my uncle, for now. He asked, we complied. The more information we have, the better to fight them, and it gave us you, so we’re happy about it.”

The ship turned. We were leaving Earth. My family was still there, and I was leaving them behind. Right then, I didn’t feel sadness over the departure, just shock about the suddenness of it all. Happiness was foremost in my mind, if I was being entirely honest, because I’d wanted these guys back and they were back.

“Did you get to look at my medical records? I know you didn’t have that much time before we got signaled about the baby.” I almost didn’t want to ask. I pretty much knew what to expect most of the time. They didn’t know anything.

He sighed, and I already knew he didn’t, either. “I don’t know yet. You’re right. It’s not immediately identifiable, but I’m confident we can figure this out. You liked that meat we served you. It didn’t make you sick. That means there are things that can nourish you. While I work out the why, we’ll

focus on what we can do for your comfort until we get answers.”

That was sweet. I leaned over and kissed him on the lips. Most of the time, I didn't want to kiss my doctors. This was a big change. “We're not going to work it out. I'm sorry. I'll frustrate you, but I hope you don't regret that I smell like your mate.”

“You don't smell like my mate.” His eyes were hard when he answered. “You *are* my mate. It's not just that I think it, and I'll never—not until the day I die—regret anything about you.”

Alfie was on me then. My words must have spurred him. He'd said he wanted to just sit with me, and he didn't ask for more, but he took it. Alfie stopped kissing me, but just to cup my cheek, and whisper huskily, “You make me forget myself. I've always had a good relationship with my Wolf. We live in balance with each other. I'm not sure that Carl can say the same. Most people battle their animal side, but with you? I almost go primal in your presence.”

I should have stopped him right then, but I didn't. I liked when I saw just how animalistic they could be. It made me excited. What that said about me was beyond my understanding at the moment. I bit his bottom lip. For a second, his eyes went pure Wolf. As they shifted back, he was on me with a ferocity I wouldn't have attributed to Alfie before that second.

He yanked me off my chair and onto his. I wrapped my legs around him as best I could. Who was I right then? I didn't even know. The old Esther didn't do things like this, didn't even know how to do them. The fact that I wanted it so badly I didn't care that Jadon and Carl had to be perfectly aware of what was happening was another matter.

Let them watch, if they want to. Something wanton had been born inside of me and I loved it. Alfie did, too, because he growled as he kissed down my neck, stopping only to rip my shirt away from my body. The fabric ripped, and he threw it over my head to who knew where.

He smiled against my lips. “You smell like mine.”

I tugged at his shirt. I couldn’t rip it and probably wouldn’t if I could—I hated shopping, the last thing I wanted to do was to always be purchasing clothes—so I needed some help getting it off him. He grinned before he threw it over his head.

“No more ripping my clothes. It’s sexy, but I don’t have that many of them.”

He made a growling noise, so I kissed him again. “You can make that noise, though. I love it.”

“I’m glad, because I’m not sure I can control it when it comes to you.” He kissed my neck. “I’m going to bite you right there, just so you know. I’ll control myself with your clothes; however, my mate will have all the clothes she wants. We’ll see to it.”

I groaned. “I don’t want to talk about clothes right now.” Not even a little bit. “Except the part where I get us both out of them.”

We were a ridiculous tangle of arms and legs as we stripped each other out of our clothing. I almost elbowed him in the nose once, which earned me that growl again and a kiss on the end of my elbow. I hadn’t known that could be a sexual part of my body, but I moaned as his lips touched me.

“Oh she has a spot right there.” He kissed it again. “How completely convenient.” He kissed my elbow again.

I practically melted. “It’s not that my elbow is a spot, I can promise you that. It’s that you’re the one kissing it.”

“I like that even better. Okay, then, I’ll think of it as our spot.” He kissed me, this time on my mouth, and our tongues danced together. Alfie stroked my breast, stopping at my nipple to tease it. We kissed and kissed as I drove myself closer to his cock. I wanted to grind myself against him, but our position made it more difficult than I would have liked.

He slipped a finger inside of me. I knew what he’d find. I was wet, practically dripping for him. My body pulsed around his fingers as he found my clit. In a circular motion, he started to touch me. There was a rhythm to how he pleased me, and

it was just what I needed. I leaned back, my neck feeling heavy as my eyes closed of their own volition.

There was nothing but pleasure right then. All-consuming bliss, and I'd never been so happy to be swept away in anything in my life as I was right then. I held my own breasts, squeezing them, but he made that noise again so I let go. He replaced one of my hands with his mouth, sucking hard. I bucked against his hand, coming faster than I ever believed was possible.

The chair vibrated with our movements. I hoped it would hold up to the assault we were giving it, but I wasn't sure I would give a shit if we fell. I might just roll him over and keep going. I panted, needing more than his fingers. I craved Alfie's hot cock.

"Inside of me, please."

"What is this *please*? You tell me what you want, and you have it. That's how this fucking works."

Fine. "Then give me what I want, Alfie."

His smile was fast. "As my mate wishes."

He jumped up. Where were we going? As it turned out, nowhere. Alfie pushed everything off the table and laid me down on it. Things crashed around us. Damn. It was ridiculously hot. Alfie pushed inside of me. He was long, hard, thick, and it hurt for a second to accommodate him. It was discomfort I was happy to have, because a second later he more than fit inside of me.

Alfie moved fast. I'd no sooner catch my breath than he would pull out and push back in, again and again. I wanted more, wrapping my legs around him to draw him further inside. He moaned. It was the best sound I'd ever heard. I could hear his longing for me in the sound, and I fucking loved it.

"Didn't expect to ever have this. Not ever. Didn't believe."

He wasn't using full sentences, and that was fine, because I couldn't think clearly, anyway. I could only feel, and in that moment, everything I felt—years of loneliness, fear, and

discomfort—fled into nothing but pleasure. I just loved how Alfie made me feel.

I cried out his name who knew how many times? He followed me, and as I tried to catch my breath, he bit me right where he said he would. I laughed, not sure what to do with all the feelings rushing through me, making my heart race. I desperately wanted to bite him back. I wanted my mark right there, on his neck.

But my teeth were dull. I'd never be able to give him what he gave me, and that seemed so unfair. I couldn't dwell, not when there was Alfie and the way that he felt temporarily on top of me on a table on a spaceship heading back to the Wolf planet.



“IS IT TOO LATE?” I asked as I played with Alfie's hair. We sat together on the bench next to the chair. I lay on him more than sat with him as he looked at the readings from my watch. There was an ease to him that hadn't been there before.

He kissed my neck where he'd bit me, frowning. “Too late for what? Does that hurt?”

I ignored the second question. Of course it hurt, but that was neither here nor there at the moment. I liked my new mark. I didn't care if it hurt. “I was thinking I might like to say goodbye to my mother. It might be nuts. I mean, she won't know one way or the other that I'm even there, but she's in a hospital near Mars. Is it too late? It suddenly feels like something I should do.”

The shuttle made a noise, and there was the slightest vibration. Alfie grinned. “That would be Jadon saying, yes, we can go. He's turning the shuttle. He'll find the location in our database. You can say goodbye to your mom. I'd like to see her. Maybe I can help.”

I sighed. “You know how I don't make any sense? Neither does she. She's entirely dependent now, can't feed or bathe herself.” I closed my eyes. “I don't want to end up like that.”

“You won’t.” It wasn’t Alfie who answered me. It was Jadon. “I won’t allow it.”

I opened my lids and sat up. “Is that within the Alpha’s purview to control?”

There was no way Jadon could make that promise. He ignored my question and instead walked over to my side. “You were understandably waylaid here, but how about you go get set up in your quarters? Then you can see your mom when we get there. After that, we’ll feed you on the way home. It’ll be a little while until we get there, several days. I’d make it go faster, but ultimately, we can’t alter how long it takes to move through space, not really. All we’ll do is tax the engines.”

Alfie laughed. “In his other life, he’s an engineer. He is always concerned with the engines.”

“That is why our ships fly so well.” He extended his hand. “Come. I’ll show you your room.”

The place wasn’t that big. I could probably find it if he pointed, but I wanted to hold Jadon’s hand and was happy to have him take me. “It’s here.”

He walked toward a door, and it opened automatically for him with a whoosh. I followed him. It was a clean space with all the basics but no decoration. Attached were two more doors, one was probably leading to a bathroom and the other likely a closet. I’d have to investigate to make sure.

Jadon ran a hand through his hair. “They can’t keep their hands off you, and I can’t blame them, but I’m not going to jump you until you’ve eaten and rested. Okay? It’s not lack of interest, it’s me doing what I do.”

The Alpha took care of everyone. I hadn’t understood that before, but it was absolutely correct. He’d held me when I had the nightmares. He made sure the others slept and ate. He’d been watching the whole time and he still was. Jadon always had his gaze on us, whether we knew it or not. The other two just accepted it. His Alpha-ness was probably part of their culture, but I wasn’t going to forget it.

I hadn't showered since I'd been with Carl and now with Alfie's lovemaking inside of me, too, I was a bit of a mess. It was hot to think about it, but I needed to bathe.

"Is the shower big enough for both of us?"

He blinked. "It is, but... I've told you. Food. Rest."

I held up two fingers. "The shower sort of counts as rest and you can feed me right after." I'd get myself clean and ease my need for Jadon, which only seemed to have grown in the minutes since I'd been with Alfie. My mating wasn't complete. He had to be feeling it, too. I wasn't a Wolf, so it was probably worse on him.

He walked toward me. "Are you sure? I'm trying to be a gentleman like your human men. I don't want you hurt by too much attention."

"I don't think that's possible." I walked toward the bathroom, but unfortunately it turned out to be the closet. That was, of course, how it happened, because that was my luck. Sauntering toward the bathroom and it was, of course, the fucking closet.

I opened the other door to the bathroom, and looked over my shoulder at him. "Up to you."

At first, I didn't think he was going to come. I dropped my clothes and put on the hot water with no company. Okay, he was serious. No sex until I was fed and rested. I'd just have to wait. I stepped under the spray. It was very warm, and I closed my eyes. There was shampoo and conditioner in the corner. Someone had set up this room very well. I would bet it was Jadon himself. He would've thought about it.

The door opened, and in seconds, Jadon joined me under the spray, totally naked. *He did that fast.* I might never get used to how quickly they could move.

"I tried to resist, but how does one turn down an offer like that from one's mate? Particularly when she isn't wearing my mark yet?" He kissed me all over my face. "I've been hard for you since the moment we first scented you in the woods. Hard as I've ever been in my life. Endlessly. Aching. Needing you."

His words were their own seduction. “I almost lost you to that explosion, and then again over and over. Then you were gone.” He tugged me to him, our naked, wet bodies touching. I looked up at him, admiring the way his body was shaped. “I don’t lose what’s mine. I take and keep it.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck. “You came, and it looks like you’ve taken me.”

“Only because I’m so fucking lucky.” He shook his head. “Any number of things that went another way and we’re not here right now, so I asked myself, what the fuck was I doing trying to behave like a human man? You never wanted them, or you would’ve had one and never showed up on my planet for me to find you.” He sniffed at my hair. “I’m a Wolf. We take what we want, and we don’t say sorry for it.”

He grabbed a bottle of soap and rubbed it over my body, taking his time as if he already knew all the places where I needed an extra rub. I closed my eyes. “You always take care of everyone, Jadon. Does anyone take care of you?”

With a stroke down my stomach, he pressed his soap filled hand against my pussy. I gasped. This was the best way that I’d ever gotten clean in my life. He moved behind me to hold me like that while he stroked me, letting the water finish where his hand had started. I moaned.

“You take care of me. By existing.” He kissed my neck. It was a free spot. Was he going to bite me there? Was this his spot?

I shook my head. “I can do better than that, Jadon. I can... When...” I lost my train of thought and he laughed gently in my ear.

He took the shampoo and scrubbed my hair. “Normally, I would be completely overwhelmed by the scents in here. I have to be very particularly careful with what scents I bring into my life, but I don’t mind these. Even then, I can hardly notice them at all because there is you. There is only you.”

I wanted to climb up his body. We were both wet, and it could be risky, but I’d bet my life he wouldn’t let me fall.

Giving into instincts, I did just what I wanted. Flipping around, I launched myself up his body. He dropped his hands to hold me beneath my ass and I wrapped my legs around him. “Take me right here.”

“I had plans for foreplay.” He lifted an eyebrow. “You keep screwing up my planning, Esther.”

I loved the way he said my name. It sounded like a prayer on his lips. I wished he could say it again and again, but even in my state I knew that would be weird. No, what I wanted was to be mated to him. Right then.

“Maybe that’s my job in life, Jadon. My one purpose.” I deliberately said his name, just in case he liked it the way I liked it when he said mine. “To mess with your plans.”

He kissed me, hard. *A claiming. Ownership. His. Mate.* I understood him like I had in the woods—completely—even though we didn’t speak a word. He pushed inside of me and I used my own strength to move on top of him and back out. I rode him while he held me up, his back to the wall. He must not like that. Instead, he flipped me around so my back was where his had been. Then he took over the riding, and I hung on as he pressed in and out of me.

We both cried out. Yes, it was much better when Jadon was in charge. I preferred it. I needed it as much as anything. As much as air. The water pounded down on us like our own personal warm rainstorm. I kissed him everywhere I could reach, squeezed his nipples, dug my fingers into his back. I wanted to mark him. I couldn’t with my teeth, but I would with every other part of my body that I could possibly manage.

Finally, and way too soon, I came apart around him. It was like a shattering, as though my soul released whatever leftover energy I had and gave it to that moment.

“Beautiful,” he whispered as he emptied inside of me. His mouth bit down on my shoulder, very close to where he had kissed me. I smiled, even as the slightest disappointment at my own lack of teeth hit me.

I'd never imagined wanting to be a Wolf shifter. And I didn't, really. Just in this small way. I lifted my head so he could kiss me. He didn't disappoint.



I SHOVED my hair into a bun and stared at Jadon as he stared out the window of my bedroom. The space station where we kept my mother was out there. I didn't like to look at dockings. They made me kind of nauseated. I didn't have a turtleneck to cover my neck, so I would be giving the people on the station quite a view of my hickey habit. That's what they'd think anyway.

Oh well. It was none of their business. "How did you know?"

He looked over his shoulder. "Know?"

"When I was having nightmares in the woods, you knew. How? Could you smell it?"

Jadon walked over and wrapped me in a hug. "I just did. I don't know if I could smell it, per se. It's just one of those things that I know."

I was never going to understand them. "Well, I'm glad that you could do that and thank you. I never said thank you."

"Without words, you said thank you." He kissed my neck right over his mark. "And now we can talk, which makes it all worth it."

I hoped that continued to be true. "Locked and ready." Carl grinned at us. "You look just like I pictured you would. You are ours, and everyone will know it. I don't think I've ever been so proud in my life."

I reached out my hand, and he took it. "We're going to go with you."

That much was obvious. "I'm glad. I really don't want to be separated from you." I blinked. "Is that a mating thing?"

They both nodded while Alfie came through the door. “We’re connected now on a cellular level. I’m glad you can feel it, even though you’re human. I hoped you would.”

At least I could do one thing right.

I hadn't been on the space station where they kept my mother in so long. I couldn't even remember the last time I visited her. She didn't know us anymore, so maybe it was too much to have her not recognize her daughter. Maybe I just made up excuses for my poor behavior.

It was chilly in the room where she spent her mornings, but it reminded me of the parlor in the home where I grew up. Whoever took care of her, they'd turned her wheelchair toward the window. I stopped abruptly when I saw her.

She really never seemed to age. In her white sweater, paired with a pink turtleneck, she could have been my sister, not my mother—still so beautiful, even if she was completely out of it. Blonde like the rest of my family—I had to have gotten my coloring from whoever my father was.

“Hi, Mom.” I stooped low next to her chair so we'd be eye to eye. “I'm Esther. I came to see you. I'm your daughter. I'm leaving, and I won't be able to see you anymore, so I wanted to say goodbye. These guys are...”

She grabbed my arm, essentially stopping me from what I was going to say. Her eyes were wide, and she lifted her hand to touch my neck where the guys bit me. Her stroke hurt, so I backed off a little. It was still too raw to be messed with, and I didn't want anyone to touch my neck except them. Maybe their marking me essentially made my neck their property?

Jadon put his arm around me, gently drawing me to him. “That hurt you, right? We could smell it. It'll stop hurting so

much after a while. It's just too new, although I'd rather no one touch it but us."

He'd spoken my thoughts aloud as his own. At least we were on the same page.

"All of that aside..." Alfie stepped near my mom. "You certainly got her attention with your neck." He bent down toward my mom. "I'm Alfie. I'm mated to your daughter. That is so much more than being her husband, but it's similar. You haven't felt well for a long time. I'd really like to help you." He took her hand and squeezed it.

Carl remained by the door. "Alfie, if you want to do something, go ahead. I'll watch for doctors and nurses or orderlies or whatever."

What was he going to do? "Alfie?"

He sighed. "I wish there was something I could do. Maybe if I brought her back home with us, I could work on it."

She squirmed in her chair and cried, tears leaking from her eyes. I'd never seen her do that before. "Mom." I moved back toward her, my heart in my throat. We'd come to say goodbye, and we were making things much worse. "I'm sorry. We don't want to cause you pain."

"You're not." Alfie shook his head. "Not physically, anyway. I'm scenting sadness, and I'm not sure what the other thing is. Are you, Jadon? Carl?"

Carl stepped further into the room. "Sadness, yes. But also, longing? And confusion."

"General distress." Jadon closed his eyes and breathed deeply. "Hard to make anything out under the sadness. You'd never get past that, Alfie. You have to fix it. The healer needs to know why. Don't beat yourself up over it."

He lowered his head. "I can fix so many things but not this right now. Can we take her with us?"

Jadon opened his lids. "We're in no condition to do so. We don't have the means to break a patient out of here, and I doubt they'd just let us take her, regardless of your status as

her daughter. We'd have to get a court order." He rubbed his eyes. "I'll send back a group when we get home to steal her. Using stealth, they'll get it done, if that's what our mate wants. Do you? It's okay to say no."

Alfie widened his eyes. It might destroy him if I said no. They had plans, but he still had to make my mother well and to fix me. He wanted to do those two things so much more than following the outline they'd made to fix things. I blinked. That had happened in the woods, too. All of a sudden, I could hear in my head what they thought. Or maybe what I thought they were thinking?

"What's that face?" Alfie rose and took my cheeks in his hands. I loved when they did that. I could melt into them. Yep... I had it bad.

"I had the sensation that I could hear your thoughts for a second. I had the same thing happen with Carl in the woods before. Just... weird. I'm clearly crazy. We can't hear each other's thoughts, right?"

Alfie slowly grinned at me. "I can't believe the small things you're getting from this mating. Traditionally, the female partner of the mating can in fact read some of the male's thoughts. Not constant. But she's able to hear big thoughts that he sends to her. Maybe I was doing that. Maybe Carl did it without thinking. Of course, Jadon doesn't, he's always been so controlled."

Jadon shook his head. "I'd like her to hear my thoughts, too. I can try pushing my stuff out to her. I'm going to do that. I'm not... controlled when it comes to my mate."

Alfie didn't seem to particularly care what Jadon had to say at that moment as he held my gaze. "What did you hear me think? What am I projecting?"

Carl rubbed my back. "What did I think in the woods?"

"Well, actually there was a running theme between the two of you but also different. It had to do with a plan you're both concerned with, but then, Carl, the rest of your thoughts were about me. Wanting me. With Alfie, it was health things, about

my mom and me. Wanting to make us better more than you wanted the plan.” I paused. “Is there a plan I should know about? If this all turns out to be some game I need to know about...”

Jadon kissed my cheek. “We can talk about that on the ship, okay? Yes, there’s a plan. No, it’s absolutely not a game, although I like games. I’d love to chase you and catch you.”

Alfie groaned. “No one is chasing her anywhere until I get her fixed up, but we can figure out other games. Yes, I want to make you better more than anything, and now I also want to fix your mom. I don’t think you have the same thing by the way. Not at all. Yours is physical while hers seems to be coming from an emotional state. Do you want us to send someone to get her?”

I slipped from his embrace to touch my mother’s hair. “Could we take care of her there? Obviously, she needs full time help.”

Alfie nodded. “Better than they are here, yes, so this is up to you, sweetheart. I might even be able to fix her. Really, our medical facilities dwarf what they can do here.”

“Okay.” I kissed my mother’s cheek. “I’m going to do better, Mom. They’re going to send some people here to get you and bring you to me and then Alfie. He is very smart and good at his job, and he’s going to help us both.”

I hugged her, and for the first time in as long as I could remember, her arms came around me, holding onto me tightly. She tried to say something but then stopped. I wished I could know what she was saying. I’d do anything for her. We’d never known each other, other than when I was an infant.

She’d come home wrecked, that was all I ever heard. They wouldn’t say what happened to her, she had me, and then eventually had to be taken here. For four years, they tried to take care of her at home, but she kept vanishing in the middle of the night. As she also became more and more uncommunicative, they got scared.

Could we have done better? I didn't know, not really. No one had asked me. I was four at the time, but I'd been embraced in the love of my big, loud, rich family, and it seemed disloyal to the people who loved me as their own to complain because I didn't have my mother. It had been me who had stopped asking to go visit. That was on me. Maybe I could be forgiven for ignoring her as a teenager. I'd been battling my natural teenage narcissism at the same time as I'd been trying to come to terms with the fact that I was never going to not be sick.

I'd been a grown up long enough to have done better, and I hadn't.

"I'm sorry, Mom." I kissed her cheek again. "See you soon."

Tears leaked from my eyes as I walked away. When we were past the guards at the entrance, Carl picked me up into his arms. "You're with us. Your people are ours. All will be well."

I wished I could believe him about that last part. "Things don't tend to be well for me, not for very long."

We got back on their beautiful shuttle.

"Jadon, I think you should remove me from my position as healer." Alfie rushed past me to the kitchen area. "We've not fed her, not taken care of her. We were more attentive in the woods."

I waved my hand. "I'm rarely hungry."

Alfie came out holding a container. "That's not better. Do you remember in the woods when we fed you that meat that you liked? It didn't make you sick like the other things did."

Yes, I absolutely did remember. "Oh, yum. It made me feel full but not ill. It's so hard to do that with me."

With a grin, Alfie lifted the container he held. "I brought it for you."

Carl grinned as he walked to the control area of the shuttle. "He went back into the woods and killed the beast to bring it

to you here. He was rather determined.”

“Well, I knew nothing of our mate, except she needed me, and I could not get to her. I had lost her, and that was my fault. She was sick and that is literally what I do. All I knew was that this didn’t make her sick. So yes, Esther, I went and got it for you because I had nothing else to do.” He opened the container. “Sit down.”

I did as he said, and he brought out plates. “Is anyone else eating?”

“No.” Jadon kissed me before he walked by. “I want to help Carl get us out of here. You’re right, Alfie, we’re neglecting her health. We will all do better. Feed our mate.”

I took a tentative bite of the food he placed in front of me. It was delicious. I chewed it slowly. There was a possibility that, although it had once been fine, it wouldn’t be any longer. I swallowed and waited.

Alfie lifted an eyebrow. “Well?”

“So far so good.” I ate more, trying to restrain myself from gorging on the meat. Too much would be too much regardless of the food.

“I could watch you do anything. Just sit here and watch you.” He leaned on his elbow and did just that. Apparently, he wasn’t eating, either. Eventually, my stomach couldn’t take any more. I stopped and pushed the plate a little bit away.

“Thank you, I can’t eat any more.”

Alfie frowned. “It’s not enough. You haven’t eaten, and we’ve done so much. Slept, had sex—you three times—ran from authorities, visited your mother.”

That reminded me of the folder I still hadn’t looked at. What was the matter with me? I grabbed it and pulled it over to me. “I never eat very much. I can’t. And tomorrow I might not be able to eat this, even though I could today. Being hungry? It’s normal for me.”

He grabbed over his heart. “Like you took a knife and stabbed me. I want to feed you more than I want almost

anything.”

I had to control myself from asking him if he wanted to feed me more than he wanted to fuck me, because that would surely land me on the table again with my legs wrapped around him. I craved that, too, but at some point, I had to look at this folder. We’d run from the planet because of this folder.

I flipped it open and then looked at Alfie one more time. “You’re completely adorable.”

His grin was huge. “Adorable? I’m adorable. I’ll take that. Thank you, Esther. I don’t think anyone has ever thought of me that way, ever.”

“That’s because you’re absolutely not adorable.” Carl yelled from the control room. I rolled my eyes, forcing my gaze down to the folder.

There were pages and pages of information, and I quickly forgot how wonderful Alfie, Carl, and Jadon were. I had in front of me an outline of the plan the Union had for the shifter planets. Right there, with names, dates, and attempted coups. In some places, they’d been more successful than others. And, then there were the names of women. Starting fifteen years earlier, they’d begun tracking women who mated shifters on various planets. There were about a hundred of them that they knew of, but they suspected there were more. The Union didn’t think the shifters themselves understood how likely it was that they’d mate with a human. Since the shifters kicked the humans off their planets they’d all but destroyed evidence of it ever having happened.

The Union liked that.

There were resources they wanted, and since the shifters were weak and incredibly mateless these days on all three planets, it was the perfect time to pounce on them. They used to be strong, but poor decision making, isolationism, and just general bigotry really screwed with things.

“Esther?” Jadon came up behind me, putting his arms around me. “What does it say? Alfie, give me the translating glasses.”

The piece embedded in my ear let us understand each other, but we couldn't read each other's languages unless we wore translating glasses. It was a little less convenient.

“It says a lot of concerning stuff. The Union is targeting the shifter planets. I know you're involved in this somehow. And maybe that has to do with your plan.” I lifted the folder. “This is the kind of thing that I would have thought my cousin could have used, but I guess he's not the one. I'm thinking—and hoping—that it's actually you, Jadon.”

He took the folder from me and started reading. “It is, mate. It's me.”

It should have sounded egotistical, but instead it was just that he was sure, absolutely cognizant he was the man for the job. Jadon didn't do false modesty. He lifted his gaze finally to meet mine. “This was just what I needed. It ends soon. And, Alfie, you were right. Everything got fucked up when they ejected the humans.” He nodded again. “It's time.”

I leaned back. “Your plan?”

“My father and others like him, they oppose the Union—which I agree with them about—but they were there when the humans were ejected five decades ago. They were the group that made that decision. Almost immediately things went to hell. Anyone who had the audacity to try to mate a human was kicked out or their mates were killed, which is the same as killing the Wolf since we don't do okay when our mates are killed.” He ran a hand through his hair. “Our generation, we see things differently. We want the old ways back. The right to mate whoever we want to.” He pointed at me. “Like you, for example. I can't speak for the Bears and the Cats. This is their own problem to solve. But, we aren't going to allow this to continue. We just have to get the Union out of our lives. Stop them from interfering. That meeting where we met you, that was them continuing to make plans. We were there pretending to agree with them. We have a problem, fighting on all sides. Only now we have you and we won't lose you.”

I sat forward. “That's very sweet, Jadon, but it raises some questions for me.”

“Of course it does.” Carl sat down at the table. “Autopilot for a minute. There’s no one around.”

“First, you’re wondering what kind of reception you should expect at home. Now that you’ve heard that Wolves don’t want humans on their planet.”

That actually hadn’t been my first concern but yes, that was among them. “Will it be very bad? Should we not bring my mom, if it’s so hostile?”

“The only way that we get through this is to push through. Among the younger Wolves, you’ll have no problems.” Jadon sat across from me. “And if any were to give you any shit, I’d challenge and kill them. I’m the strongest Wolf of our generation. I formed my own pack. I’m ready to take on my father and the others if they don’t relent. This will be okay. Better than okay.”

I kissed his cheek. “It may not be that simple. Nothing ever is. We couldn’t have just brought you to Earth and made them accept you. Announced you were there. You’d have been arrested. We had to run away. That isn’t going to be different where you’re from.”

“It will. Our society is fundamentally different in that way. The leaders on our planet actually lead. You can trust me.”

He was wrong, I was sure of it. I’d committed to their plan, to going with them, and if it didn’t work, then we’d have to figure out what to do next. “There are planets where the shifters who’ve had to leave with their humans have gone.”

Carl shook his head. “That doesn’t make it better. It’s only a bandage, a personal triumph. It fixes nothing. I won’t lose you, and I will run if that has to happen. We all will. Esther, we can do this. You’re smart to question and worry. You can trust us.”

“I do.” It must be part of the mating. “As long as you promise me you’re not being naive.”

Jadon’s thoughts reached me then, like butterfly wings stroking my brain. He’d never been naïve. He was born fighting.

I took his hand. “Okay.”

His grin was huge. “I told you that I could do it, too.”

They talked plans for a long time. Alliances. People I didn’t know and names I was unfamiliar with. Eventually, I started to doze off. I never asked them my real question. They said mates didn’t do well when one died, and I was probably going to do that. What would happen to them? I never asked it, not even as Alfie swept me up in his arms to hold me close against him and bring me into the bedroom.

He thought he could fix me. I closed my eyes and let him tuck me into bed. Three shadows fell over me as I drifted off with the sway of the ship beneath me.



I WOKE UP IN PAIN. I didn’t let myself open my eyes right away, breathing through it. I knew the scenario; I’d lived it a lot. The light was going to be too bright, everything would hurt—as it already did—and that would be just one more pain to assault me.

A hand touched my forehead. “You’re in terrible pain.”

Okay, that was a reason to lift my lids. Alfie was there. I forced myself to regard him, past the blur of my vision and the pain that came with it. “Sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing?” He kissed my face. “I’m the one who should apologize. What happened here?”

I wished I had answers. “Sometimes it comes about. I don’t know how else to explain it. There’s no good explanation. I just hurt.”

He smoothed my hair. “Okay. We’re going to give you all your meds, see if you can stomach some food. Carl is going to hurry up the fucking engines so I can get home and get back to a place where I might actually be able to help you. Meanwhile, I’m going to get you something for the pain. You liked the plant leaf. It made you a little loopy, but you felt better. There are things that are related to that plant that I can give you.”

I groaned and closed my eyes. “I’m sure Carl is flying as fast as he can.”

“No, he’s not. He just sped up the engines because I yelled at him. We’d all like as much alone time as we can have, but you need care, and that isn’t going to happen on this ship the way I would like, unfortunately.” He sighed.

“You just want to make me ridiculous like I was in that cave.”

He laughed. “It was one of my favorite memories ever. I loved hearing you hum to yourself. This probably won’t do that to you. It’s filtered a bit. Less la-la and more, oh, no pain.”

Carl leaned in the doorway. “If you take it that way. Don’t listen to him, Esther. We can have fun with your painkillers. Alfie can do better. She can still have the high. Why not give it to her?”

“Shouldn’t you be driving?” Alfie walked toward Carl and past him. “You fly, Enforcer, and let me heal her.”

Carl watched him walk away and then rolled his eyes like he was mocking him. “The good Healer forgets that there is more to life than just being cautious. Our Alpha is flying. I flew all night. We sped up the engines. You’re in pain.” He pulled two lozenges out of his pocket and handed me one. “Suck on it. Or bite it quickly. Depends on how quickly you want to feel what it does.”

He stuck one in his mouth and then gently lay down next to me. I stared at it. Carl would never give me something that would hurt me. Granted, Alfie didn’t want me to do it, but I’d sort of liked how it felt to be high that day. If I had to be in pain, couldn’t I also be happy? I put it in my mouth and sucked on it.

Carl grinned at me. “Good. We’ll float a little bit together for a while.”

“Oh great.” Alfie came back in. “Now I see that you’re susceptible to his charms, I’ll have to be more careful. That won’t hurt you, but you’re going to end up singing or doing something else on that. I get to be the drag now, the one who

gives you all the rest of your meds and feeds you.” He came around and sat on the other side of me. “I’d love to get high.”

Carl shrugged. “So get high. Our fearless leader is flying. She’ll take her meds. She’s going to feel better soon with the candy. Take a break.”

I leaned against Alfie’s arm. “You could never be a drag. You’re my Alfie.”

He kissed my head. “Hand me a lozenge, Enforcer.” Alfie held out my meds. “You first, and then I’ll have one, and then Jadon might just want to kill us all. Well, not you, Esther. I think you have a free pass, but Carl and I will be in trouble.”

As I took my meds and watched him take his, it was clear that Alfie was absolutely not afraid of Jadon. Carl wasn’t either, his chuckle making it seem like everything would be okay. He must have chewed his up fast. I sucked on mine, some of the ache in my bones fleeing. It wasn’t perfect, but it was much, much better.

“**W**hat is that?” I stared at the shadow on the wall that Carl made. I’d been trying to guess what he’d been attempting to make for some time. Alfie snored next to me, having given up on the identify-the-shadow game about an hour earlier and conked out, his hand on my breast.

Carl shook his head. “You have to guess.”

“I can’t. I don’t know what it is.” I kissed his cheek. “So please tell me.”

“It’s a dog.” Jadon came into the room. “Come on, you three. Up, Alfie. Time to eat something. I’m glad they were able to make you feel okay today, Esther.” Jadon kissed the end of my nose. “We’ll be back at home tomorrow. My home. And we’ll get it figured out.”

That was a sweet sentiment. Carl placed a hand on my knee. “Can you move? Or will it hurt too much? We can bring dinner to you.”

“I can move.”

Alfie sat up, rubbing his eyes. “That’s why I never take that stuff. Feels awesome but it puts me on my ass.” He shook his head. “Weird dreams.”

Carl jumped off the bed. “I feel like I could run the whole planet. You snored, Alfie. A lot.”

His face paled. “Did I? I don’t snore.”

“Well, maybe the weed makes you snore, too, because you were going at it.” Carl left the room and Alfie took me in his arms.

He smelled clean and also warm, like he'd just been asleep. “Don't decide you can't sleep with me. If it becomes a thing, I'll get it fixed. Find out why. Don't...”

I kissed him right on the lips. “It didn't bother me in the least.”

“Okay.” He kissed me back. “I'm glad Jadon had the sense that you needed to be fed while I lost sense of time.”

“I told you. I'm almost never hungry.”

He helped me off the bed. “And I told you that doesn't make me feel better about you not eating. Come on.”

I followed him to the small table that would fit all four of us, but just without much room for even the plates. It was cozy. I could stay like this forever, even with my muscles screaming at me. As it was, I couldn't really eat what Jadon made. It was a little bit too spicy. I knew it would be a problem with the first bite, and I foolishly ate five just to sort of force food into my stomach. Finally, I set down my fork.

“Sorry, I'd like to. It's delicious.” I smiled. That would have to be enough. They'd get used to the fact that I really couldn't eat. Everyone eventually did.

Jadon jumped. “Too spicy? I'll get more of the pig that Alfie got you.”

“I'm full now.” I took his hand. “Sorry.” Actually, my stomach turned. I knew exactly what was going to happen. I hated puking. “Just... stay away from this.”

I hoped that they would.

Hours later, as I lay on the floor of the bathroom staring at the ceiling and wondering if I really was done, Alfie crept in with me. He lay down next to me. “You have to be finished.”

“There is no have to with me.” I sighed. “Done with me yet?”

Jadon followed him in and stared down at both of us. “I’m so sorry I poisoned you.”

“It’s me, not you.” Then I giggled. That was a line my cousin always said to the girls he broke up with. “I probably am done.”

Jadon picked me up. “You must be.”

The jovial mood had fled the shuttle and I couldn’t even blame them.



I RAN a brush through my hair with my right hand, which shook a little bit less than my left one did, and stared at myself in the mirror. “Well, it’s nice to meet you, Wolf Planet. Yes, I’m a wreck. Yes, I’m sick and probably dying. And I’m mated to three of your best males. Try not to be too impressed with how bad this situation is.” There was a knock, and I was sure they’d all heard me. I had to remember they had heightened abilities. If I didn’t want things heard, then I had to stop saying them aloud. “Come in.”

“Hey.” It was Jadon. He stepped into the bathroom and closed the door. “Don’t talk about yourself that way. Be kind to yourself. You’re amazing. We can say it as many times as you need to hear it, but we wouldn’t want any other mate but you. Not ever. So many things happen to you, and you just keep smiling and keep going. You take on danger. You do things for others, but all the while, you feel terrible and don’t even know why or how it happens.” He came over and put his arms out to draw me to him. He stared at me in the mirror and I looked back at his reflection. “I wish you could see yourself like I see you.”

I blinked away my tears. “Just nervous I guess. I can’t believe I slept through everything after the puking and now we’re here. I’m... ready now.”

I’d put on a white suit that I hoped showed off my eyes and my hair. White had always been my color—or shade, as I was sometimes reminded.

“You’re not. Take a moment.” He ran a hand over his mark on my neck. I shuddered with pleasure. Yep, it was different when they touched me there. The guys had taken ownership of the skin on my neck.

He audibly took a breath, placing his nose against my neck while he did so. “You like that.”

“I do.” I leaned back against him. “How could I not?”

“Open your eyes and look in the mirror.” Jadon used what had to be his best *I’m in charge* voice, and I complied with his order. He slipped a hand up my skirt and pressed his fingers inside of my undies, quickly finding where he wanted to go. “You keep watching yourself.”

I wasn’t sure I could if he was going to do what I thought he was going to do. “Jadon.”

“Trust me, and for right now, obey me.” He sniffed at my mating mark again. “I don’t want you to obey me like the others. You’re my family, and more importantly, my mate. We will talk, and I won’t order, except when it comes to essential things. And right now, it’s essential you see how beautiful you are coming apart in my arms.”

It was? He pressed against my clit and my knees threatened to give out. Jadon knew how to touch me. He stroked his finger over my bundle of nerves again and again. My clit swelled under his ministrations, pulsing with need I hadn’t realized was in me until he touched me. I watched us in the mirror. Jadon pressed a second finger against his first, rubbing the area around my clit until I panted.

My eyes in the mirror that stared back at me were huge. His were closed as he licked my mating mark at the same time. A thought dawned on me through the pleasure haze filling me. This didn’t need to be all about me at that second. I pushed back against his cock, crying out as I did, the pleasure starting to mount inside of me.

He moaned, his hand that wasn’t pleasuring me tightening on my stomach and then moving up to clutch at my breast. “No, mate.” His voice was low, commanding. “Just you right

now. I want to be hard all day thinking of you. Seeing you like this, coming apart for me in my arms. It is my right as your mate to give this to you. I need to feel the pain of wanting you, of needing completion in your sweet pussy all day. I crave it.”

I... I had nothing to say to that particularly, because right at the moment, he licked his spot before he bit down on it again. I came. Hard and all at once. He'd told me to keep my eyes open and I did. With my head thrown back and my cries filling the bathroom, maybe I really was beautiful in his arms.

He continued to stroke me as the trembling stopped. Finally, he licked my wound, which would close it faster. They hadn't explained it to me, but somehow, I knew it.

I love you. His thought traveled to me, and I smiled at him. “Really?”

“Really.” His voice was a whisper. “Good girl.”

“Thank you.” I shook my head. “Are you sure that you want to stay like that?”

He breathed me in again. “Yes. I'm sure. It'll soften a bit in a minute, but it won't go away until I can have you again. It just reminds me that I have you. You're mine. You're real. And you're waiting for me. I've always liked a little pain. This is the best kind there ever could be.”

He liked the pain? I reached back to stroke him with my fingernail right where I would have bitten him if I could have. He cried out, digging his cock into my ass as he breathed hard. “Fuck. I almost came in my pants. Do that again another time. Just do it. I...” He closed his eyes and moaned. “I can practically picture you biting me there. Your mouth marking me. Close to that kind of pain.” Jadon rambled. I guessed it had been the right thing to do.

We stayed like that for a while. Finally, I admitted, “I'd bite you, if I could. I mean, I could but it wouldn't do what you'd want it to do. I wanted to during sex. I just can't. I don't have the right teeth.”

He breathed hard against me. Jadon had said he wanted the pain. Had he taken on more than he'd planned? Finally, he

lifted his head. “You are so incredible. Whenever you’re doubting yourself, I want you to remember what you looked like in this mirror when you came so prettily on my fingers.” Jadon put one in his mouth and moaned, again. “And that you almost brought me to my knees just with your fingertip.”

“We do seem to like to have sex in this bathroom.”

He grinned at me. “We’ll have to visit the ship once a week to keep it going, but you’re going to like your bathroom in our home. It’s much more luxurious, and we’ll just change it to there.” He kissed the back of my neck. “Come on.”

I stepped out of the bathroom and was immediately pulled in Alfie’s arms. “You can’t smell just of him today.” He kissed me, running his hand over my stomach and onto my breasts. “No time to take you the way I wanted, but I have to smell myself on you, too, or I’ll lose it, and I might try to fuck you in public.”

I widened my eyes. That was so un-Alfie. “Really?”

“Really.” He kissed me again and then nodded like he was satisfied. “Okay. Today will suck until we get home. I’ll hate it, too. You can’t smell that, so I need you to know—I hate the capital city. My parents are, and always have been, miserable shitheads, probably because they settled for a half-life. But Jadon’s parents are worse, and I am not unhappy about the idea of his father dying.” He stepped back. “Plus, you look beautiful, and I just want to lay you down in one of the beds in our home and lick you all over.”

At no point had he said anything about my health. It was sexy; he was so lost to wanting me right then. I hoped I wouldn’t ruin it by fainting or seizing. “Thank you, Alfie. I love you.” I couldn’t send the thought, but I could say it.

He blinked, rapidly. “Do we have to go?” The question wasn’t to me, it was to Jadon.

“You said speed up the engines, I need the medicine at home. We did that.” Jadon patted him on the back. As we walked toward the door, Carl pulled me into his hug.

“Stay like this a minute.” He whispered in my ear. “I need to seep into you, too, and I already know you love me. I can smell it.”

I did. I particularly loved it when he acted so cocky. “I’d stay here all day, if you wanted.”

“I hate Jadon’s father, too. And my parents. And Alfie’s parents. I’m ready to be done with all of them.”

Their reactions weren’t encouraging, to say the least. “Tell me something nice. Not about them, just anything nice. Something I can keep in my head all day. And you may know that I love you, but I can’t scent if you love me.”

“I do.” He rocked me. “So much. Something nice? Okay. We went to go spy on the Union. It was a dreaded day. The three of us away from our pack. Away from our jobs. The weather was shit. We thought it would be nothing but the worst people in the universe. And then this scent hit us. I can’t speak for them, as I think it’s different for everyone, but for me, the world was lighter. The sun was brighter. Everything smelled better. You were there. And then it exploded. I thought you were dead, but you weren’t. I could breathe again.” He kissed both my cheeks. “This time I will keep you. Forever.”

I didn’t know if we’d have forever, but I wasn’t going to spoil the thought for them. “You guys never told me, what happens if one of us dies? What happens with all of you?”

“We always know if our mates die. We don’t have to be told, because we can feel it wherever we are. Most of the time, the remaining mate—if it’s a true mating—they die, too. Unless there are young children to raise, and then they might wait until the children are older. Like it pauses. The grief goes away, hidden. And then it turns back on.” Carl sighed. “But it will be a very long time until we have to worry about that, okay?” He kissed me again. “I’m there now, too.”

I hated that thought for them. They were young, virile, important. They wanted to make things right on their planet. Would life be so unkind as to wipe them out because of me?

I never got to worry about that for very long. It was time to go.



THE LAST TIME I'd come to Planet Wolf, I'd been in the woods. Now, I was in a city, one as big as any I'd ever visited on Earth. We walked through to audible gasps and stares. I wasn't going to blend in, that was for sure. They could smell instantly I wasn't one of them.

"We greet my father. It's polite." Jadon spoke in a low voice. "Then we go. As fast as we can, we go. You'll be home tonight, and tomorrow, you'll see why we love it at home."

I was eventually hustled into what had to be the modern-day version of a throne room. It was the pack meeting space. My guys had pulled out of their pack, but they were still related to it as though they were under the umbrella for their fathers' pack. At least as far as I understood it, and that was only for the moment, since they had a major plot going to fix things.

In the meantime, I had to sit down in that pack room and be glared at. I wished I'd studied canine behavior more at some point. Would it be bad if I looked down? If the guys were dominant, did I have to be? Or could I just be a human who was really uncomfortable with the glares and growls in the room? My pulse kicked up. That wasn't great. I didn't want to faint there, of all places. That would, for sure, be very bad.

"The next person who growls or stares at my mate with anything but respect will lose their fucking head." Jadon sat next to me after the proclamation. For his part, he looked bored. I didn't know what I'd smell if I actually could scent anything.

Someone filmed us. There were lots of murmurs. I shifted in my seat. Maybe we should have just gone to the planet where that former union pilot Jessica moved. I was all for

fixing things, but I might just melt into the floor. I never really felt so unwanted before.

“You dare to do this?” Jadon’s father looked just like him but older and with mean eyes. He jumped to his feet. “To bring this human here?”

“I bring you my true mate to say hello. I could have bypassed seeing you at all. Spared her the discomfort. I’d have preferred it, but I’m still hoping there is some semblance of decency inside of you. I see that I was wrong. This is why all the sons and daughters of every pack in the world are leaving their parents’ rule. You will all die with this misery if you don’t stop this now.”

His dad didn’t seem to hear him. “She’s not even well. I can smell that. She is unfit to be yours.”

Jadon was on his feet and across the room, in his father’s face immediately. “She is my true mate. You don’t know what that means because you settled for power and not love. She is my whole world, and I will end you for what you just said.”

“You challenge *me*?” His father snarled. “You dare? Fine. At the next full moon, we’ll see if you really are the Wolf you think you are.”

I couldn’t smell what others could, but I saw something then. Something I’d seen at home when powerful men doubted their rhetoric. Jadon’s father bluffed. He wasn’t at all sure he could take my mate in a physical fight.

I looked at Carl. “When is the full moon?”

“Three weeks,” he answered me, taking my hand. “This will all be over then.”

Maybe it would. Or maybe three weeks was a very long time to leave a man like that unsupervised. But I wasn’t a Wolf, and I didn’t know how things were in Wolf politics. I certainly wouldn’t express my concerns in this room, in front of so many strangers. Besides, whatever I thought I knew, my guys had to know more. I was scent blind.

The best thing I could do was to try not to make things worse.

I stayed quiet and hoped that was the right decision.



WE'D NO SOONER BOARDED the transport that would take us from their fathers' city to the smaller town they called home that I finally gave in to the fact that I was probably going to faint. It was amazing I'd made it as long as I did. There wasn't a kind word for me in that whole room. Not one person looked at me with anything other than hate.

My skin crawled. Alfie immediately picked me up onto his lap. "I don't know how you held on that long."

So he'd been able to tell? "Did everyone know?"

"I doubt it. Maybe some of the other healers, but I don't give a shit what they knew. I wanted you out of there immediately, and it should never have been allowed to go on as long as it did." He wasn't yelling at me; it was Jadon he admonished.

Jadon kneeled in front of me as the bullet train pressed forward. "I'm sorry. I'm always letting you down. It was supposed to be fast."

I wasn't upset. As Carl touched my head, I gave in to the faint. There really wasn't anything else I could do.

They had a weak mate in a society that wouldn't tolerate anything but strength. What were we going to do?

I woke up to the sun streaming through the window in a bedroom I'd never been in before. I blinked. I'd fainted on the train, and now I was presumably in my new room. How bad had my entrance been? Did Jadon's particular pack hate me now, too?

They'd changed me out of my suit into my more comfortable sleeping clothes. Had I slept the rest of the day? The sun was low, making it almost dinner time.

Alfie came through the door. "I heard you wake up. Come on. We'll try some bland food similar to the pig. Also, I'm

running some tests that will help clarify some things.”

Gone was my sex-interested healer mate. In his place, the man who felt responsible for all things Esther-health related had returned. “How bad is it that I fainted?”

“In what way?” He sat on the edge of my bed.

“Did everyone see me have to be carried in?”

He shook his head. “No one. You’ll meet everyone tomorrow or the next day. It’s just us here for now. Come on, see the home we made for ourselves in the hope we’d one day have you to share it with. Just the idea of you. We didn’t know how much we would love you, or we would’ve traveled the universe until we saw your face.”

Alfie didn’t wait for me to get up. Instead, he picked me up in his arms. I loved it. “So romantic of you.”

“I have my moments. Just kick me when I forget to show you that I love you, or if I’m being too Healer all of the time. Or if I snore. Kick me then, too.”

I groaned. *This is going to be a thing now.* “Can we go outside and sit in the sun? I loved how it felt when I was here.”

“Yes.” He showed me around what was now my new home on the way outside. It was impressive, with more bedrooms than I could ever imagine using, and a huge downstairs. There were two kitchens, and rooms upon rooms that I could use for anything I wanted. Not that I had anything to use the rooms for. Finally, we headed outside. I didn’t see Jadon and Carl, so I figured they probably had actual jobs to do. Yes, that was true, I remembered. Jadon was an engineer and Carl was a lawyer, but Alfie was always a healer, which meant he’d probably have to take care of me day in and day out.

Finally, he set me down outside on a white chair with a view of the valley below. “This is a nice spot. I picked this spot for the furniture, so I get to sit with you here.”

That was sweet. But I again thought of him being stuck there, taking care of me. I tried to explain, saying, “I don’t want you to feel trapped with...”

He kissed me, leaning over to cut off whatever else I was going to say. Once my mind was blurred by his kisses, he explained, “I take care of the pack. You are pack now. You’re more than pack, you’re family. You’re my mate. You are my everything, my entire world. I’m not stuck with you. It would hurt me to leave you. It would cause me so much pain, I couldn’t function. Carl is patrolling the grounds to make sure all is correct here, and Jadon went to get us food. They’re probably in agonizing discomfort to have to be separated from you right now. It is many months until mates can leave each other comfortably. I’m not *stuck* with you. I am privileged to sit here.”

I loved that.

“**T**his is from the same family as that pig you can eat,” Jadon said as he moved some meat toward me. “Small bites. Tell me what you think.”

I did as he requested. So far, it didn’t turn my stomach. “I think it’s okay.”

He and Alfie nodded. Carl stared out the window. “There’s company coming.”

I looked to see what he meant. My new-to-me kitchen was gorgeous. I could sit in there all day, and I might just have to, since I currently had no other duties to perform beyond eating and sleeping. Oh, and a ton of sex, not that I was complaining. I loved that part, anyway. Carl in the shower as soon as he’d gotten home, Alfie on that bench outside when my energy level had gone up. If we’d been alone, Jadon might have taken me on the counter of the kitchen.

How I had become the luckiest girl on the planet was beyond me, but I was.

“I don’t see anyone. Can you smell it?”

Carl shook his head. “I just know.”

“That’s why he’s so amazing.” Jadon said as he walked toward the door just as I heard the car coming. “See? He’s never wrong.”

I got to my feet. I was dressed for the day but remained barefooted—not exactly prepared to meet anyone. Where were my shoes? I’d put them... I really had no idea.

“Who is it?”

Carl kissed my neck, right on his mark. Sensation cascaded from the spot, leaving a warm glow in my belly. “That is above my pay grade,” he said. “Come with me. Jadon can greet whoever it is, and we’ll decide if we’re coming out to meet them.”

I followed him across the house while Alfie laughed. “Where do I fall into this? Do I have to do the greeting, too, or can I come play *hide from the guests* with our mate?”

“Suit yourself, ” Carl said with a shrug as he grinned. “You’re just jealous you didn’t think of it before I did.”

“True.” Alfie scooted his seat back. “I’ll help Jadon send whoever it is away, since we know that’s what he’s going to do.”

The room where we waited was what Jadon had called the library, though the shelves were filled with books I wouldn’t be able to read without my word-changing glasses. Still, I loved books. Who didn’t? I ran my hands over the spines. “Some things are the same, aren’t they? World to world? Like books.” Jadon walked into the library.

“Do you love to read?” Carl touched one. “I do. So much.”

“Esther.” Jadon offered his hand. “Come on. I need you to meet these people.”

Carl rushed ahead. He wouldn’t know what was going on any more than I did, but he needed to be there before me. The Enforcer in him needed to protect me. With my feet still bare, I followed him into the kitchen. Three men waited—older, dark-haired, olive-skinned, like me. Gray sprinkled through in their hair and on their beards, and I wondered if my own hair would do that, if I lived so long.

Alfie took a deep breath as I entered the kitchen, and then stared at Jadon, who nodded. What were they smelling?

I hated being blind to whatever they might know about the situation.

“We knew it was you.” The one in the center stepped forward, hope clear on his face. “Yesterday, we saw you on the screens and we knew... you *had* to be our daughter.”

Alfie jumped from foot to foot. “It all makes sense now. All of it. I should have seen it.”

What made sense? “Sir, I’m... I’m sorry, but I can’t be your daughter. I’m human.”

The one to his left stepped forward. “You’re half Wolf. I’m not sure what you know about that. Plenty of half breeds never shift. They seem human, but they’re not entirely. We knew it might be an issue, but we loved each other, and your mother didn’t care. She said we’d figure it out.”

I held my hands out in front of me. “Okay. Stop.” *This is a lot.* “Who do you think my mother is?”

“Amy.” The third one finally spoke. “Our missing mate. We... We are so glad to see you. We never dreamed... We’ve searched for her. You have to understand, it was like a game. Once a week, we’d ask her to tell us her last name, and once a week, she’d make up something fantastical. Amy Unicorn. Amy Rainbow. She promised to tell us the last name when you were born.”

I knew so little of my mother. Was she like that? My family had called her a wanderer, said she needed to see the universe. But, yes, her name was Amy. “Espenson.” I gave them the name they hadn’t known. “That’s the last name.”

I needed to sit down, only I wouldn’t. I didn’t want them to see me fall over or seem weak. “Where have you been?”

The one in the middle’s face fell. “You’re not feeling well.”

“I’m fine.” Just because they could smell it didn’t mean they had the right to mention it aloud. I didn’t know a lot of their culture, but I knew it proved rudeness to point out my scent if I hadn’t verbally told them of my condition. “What are your names?”

Jadon came from behind me and placed his head on my shoulder as he drew me to him. “These are the Schraders.

They are often off-world. They are always searching for their missing mate, and they do things for others to fund their mission. They've helped me, in the past, to seek out information on other planets, like what is happening with the Cats. They're good men." He kissed his spot on my neck, and I calmed a little bit. If he said they were okay, they were. I trusted him.

"Esther," Alfie rushed over to touch my cheeks. "I can fix some of this now. I know what to do. Now that I know... give me a little bit." He rushed from the room.

I was glad that he was, at least, very happy about things.

I motioned toward the living room. "Won't you all come in? I've been rude. I'm not used to this being my home, but it is, I guess."

"Not guess." Carl caught my attention. "It is, and you've barely arrived yourself. If you want them to leave and come back another time, we can do that. Right now."

I hoped I could express with my eyes how grateful I was to him for offering. "No, I'm okay. Come on inside. Have a seat. Can I get you anything to eat?"

"No," the one on the left spoke again. "We... We'd like to feed you. We'd like to do anything for you at all."

Jadon took my hand and tugged me against him as we walked to the living room. "Esther never did without. You don't have to hold that fear. Amy's family took good care of her. And she'll never be without whatever she wants or needs with us, either."

"I'm sorry, what are your names? I had a last name, but not any of their firsts." I was getting a little tired of being a step behind in the conversation. I had *fathers*—plural—who were Wolf shifters, and that made me a half-breed. What did that even mean for my life?

They sat down across from me, and for a second, they didn't answer. Finally, the one who had been to the right answered me. "I'm Casey. I'm the youngest of us all. Next to me, here, is my oldest brother, Paul." He'd been standing in

the middle. “And, here to my right, is Anthony.” He visibly swallowed. “I’m sorry, but I have to ask you right off—why were you raised by Amy’s family? Where is she? Why didn’t she raise you herself? We know she’s not dead. We would’ve felt that.”

“Before I tell you anything more...” My anger surprised me, but it was there, and I couldn’t ignore it. I had fathers, but I’d never met them. Now *they* wanted answers? “Why don’t you tell me how you lost her. *Us*. Did you do something to make her run away?”

If either of my present mates had any problems with my attitude, they weren’t indicating it in a way I could understand. Of course, my nose blindness meant that they might all be talking to each other in some way I’d never comprehend. Although I didn’t think they’d exclude me—not intentionally, anyway.

Paul looked down at the floor for a second before he answered. “We met your mother on one of our spy missions. We went to a planet where they were illegally selling weapons so we could get the name of the dealer. Your mother was there waiting tables. She called herself Amy the waitress, and she’d grin, not elaborating. We knew she was our mate.”

It was hard for me to picture it. I never knew my mother when she was functional, let alone joyful. What a sense of humor she must have had. The guys in front of me seemed much more serious.

I must get that from them.

“We convinced her to come back with us,” Anthony said then sighed. “We knew it was frowned upon to have a human mate, but we hoped things would improve. We only thought it was frowned upon, we didn’t realize there would be so much hatred toward the idea. Meanwhile, her game continued. *I’m Amy Blue Sky. I’m Amy Trees*. It didn’t matter. She wasn’t keen on talking about her past, so we thought... we thought maybe she’d been abused.”

I shook my head. “Not that. She came from a very rich, powerful human family. Maybe she didn’t want you to know

that. Maybe she had her own reasons or issues with them. I don't know. She never told me."

"She was ours," Casey said fiercely, then looked at his feet again. "It wasn't until she was pregnant that we realized how much trouble we were in. There were movements that wanted her off the planet. They'd ejected most of the humans two decades before, but there were a few still around. Jadon." My father lowered his eyes. Was that a submission thing? "Your father was among the worst of those who wanted her gone."

Carl nodded. "We're aware of our fathers' bigotry against humans. We know it very well."

It looked like I was replaying my mother's issues on this planet without even knowing it. I rubbed my eyes. "And then?"

"We don't know what happened, exactly. We woke up bound, and then were eventually thrown out of a ship onto an all-but-abandoned mining planet. It took us six years of trying to get off that planet. There were few ships that would come. Each year... it was like Amy got further and further away from us. It's hard to explain it."

Actually, it wasn't. She did get more and more distant from them... mentally. "Why would you have come back here? Where they did that to you?"

"Well, at first it was because we thought maybe Amy was here. We'd been taken, but we didn't know what happened to her. Then, we thought maybe she was being held captive. We kept looking. She was pregnant—where could she go to raise a Wolf shifter? We went to Earth, but trying to find an Amy on Earth was like looking for a needle in a haystack."

Okay, I understood that concern, as it was the same reason I knew I couldn't find my men if I made it back to Planet Wolf without knowing their names. I reminded myself I hadn't walked in their shoes. I didn't know what they'd been through. It was sort of... awful to imagine, especially when I remembered being parted from my own mates.

I tried to explain what I knew, which wasn't much. "My mother became mentally ill after I was born. No one could explain why, and she wouldn't tell anyone where she had been or the identity of my father. Her mind seemed to just... go away. That's how it was described to me, at least. She heard voices. She'd wander the house, and no one would know what she was doing." I was glad not to remember it. That was a gift. "Eventually, she stopped taking care of herself and couldn't take care of me. I think it broke my grandparents' hearts to have to put her away, but they did because they couldn't take care of her at home. That's what they said." I sat back. "Maybe they could have? Maybe they could have brought someone in to do it? But the floating space station near Earth is such a good place for care. We visited all the time, I'm told. At least until she didn't know who we were anymore. Then I was raised by the rest of her large, extended family." I forced myself to meet their gazes. None of it was my fault—I'd been four years old when decisions had been made about my mother's care. Even if I felt guilt and responsibility over the situation, I wasn't in the position to change anything for her, not when it mattered. "We stopped to see her on our way here. Alfie said he could see to it that she would receive better care here, so Jadon said he'd send someone to get her."

Jadon nodded. "Apparently, I'm sending the three of you. I sent the coordinates to your tablets while she was talking."

"Female mates, when they're separated from their male counterparts for long periods of time, can get very sick. They can lose reality, even." Carl leaned forward. "We know what's wrong with your mom now, too, Esther. It's all becoming clear."

I was glad it was for them, because to me, it all just seemed insane. "So, what happens? She sees the three of them and, boom—her mind becomes clear? All the years wash away? Music plays? Everything is fine? Roll credits?"

Jadon shook his head. "I doubt it will be that easy. Few things ever are."

"Doesn't matter." Anthony got to his feet. "She has to be with us, even if she doesn't know it. I need her. *We* need her."

Just her presence. Living without her is hell. It would be my honor to care for her every day of her life from now on. We'll leave immediately."

Casey stared at me. "We wanted you so badly, please know that. We all just wanted to love you, to be a family. You'd have been here, on the planet. You have true mates. They would've been right here. I mean... how easy would that have been? You might just have bumped into them."

I *had* sort of bumped into them, but that was our story, and I wasn't feeling particularly like sharing. "I like how we met. Maybe it was harder, but it was ours."

Alfie leaned in the doorway. "It was very special." He came in holding something in his hand. "Eat this. It's just a pill that I wrapped in honey for you."

I stared at him. *He has to know better than this by now.* "We both know the honey might not be okay on my stomach."

Paul jumped to his feet. "You have been so sick, I can smell it, yet you're also so strong. You looked like us. We knew you had to be ours, and yet right around your eyes? That is all Amy. The shape of them, the way they must look when you smile... I hope that I can someday see you smile." For a second, I thought he might kiss me on my head, only he didn't move. Instead, he nodded and the other two followed him from the room.

"You can trust me." Alfie nudged me. "This is not going to hurt you. Now that I know... I know."

I took it. The stickiness made it hard to chew. "Is it okay to suck on it?"

"Yes." He sat down next to me. "There are vitamins that we need as Wolf shifters to survive. We get it from our food sources, and also from the sun here. Not all half breeds can shift, that's normal. Some do, some don't, but they need the same vitamin regardless. And, here's where it gets complicated—some half breeds can't make it. You're one of them. The health issues—they're because you're completely depleted of something you need. In fact, other than the time

you were here, you've never had it anywhere. The sun doesn't do for you on Earth what it does for you here. It has to do with our atmosphere."

The vitamin actually tasted good. "You're right. It's not upsetting my stomach." In fact, it was delicious. I loved it, like I'd loved that pig. I could eat and eat the pill he gave me to suck on with the honey. "Can I have more?"

"No. We don't want you to take too much. A little bit every day until we get you caught up. Plus, now I can check your bloodwork to see how you're doing every so often. You're going to feel better. It might not be perfect, but it will be better. Oh!" Alfie was downright animated. "You know what animal secretes the vitamins, when we get it in our food?"

That much seemed obvious. "The pig?"

"Right." He grinned. "So much better."

Carl shook his head. "Watch out. He's going to publish a paper on this."

"No, he won't." Jadon yawned. Had he gotten any sleep? "I think these papers probably are already out there. We used to know how to take care of our people, whether they were half or whole Wolf shifters. If my father hadn't destroyed your family's life, Esther, you would never have gotten sick. My dad and those like him—they're responsible for what happened to you. For your pain, for your mother's. And they *will* pay. Every single one of them.

Jadon sounded deadly serious. I didn't have to read his thoughts to pick up on his lethal intent.

I let his protection drift over me, and I moved on. Finding out I had fathers—or a father and uncles?—was a lot.

I snorted, fiddling with my hair. "When I was a little girl, I used to dream that my father would come for me. He'd just appear one day and be like, Esther, I'm sorry I've let you down. But I'm here now, and I'm going to live with you and your family." I rolled my eyes at my stupid childish daydreams. "Then my mom would suddenly be well, and we'd

all live happily ever after, of course. Oh, and I'd be able to eat pizza with no problem."

Carl walked over and knelt in front of me. "They would've come for you if they had known how to find you. They have to go take care of their mate now, but they'll be back. There is no way, now that they know about you, that they won't want to have you in their life. We have to take care of ours. Alfie's got his way, and that's going to help tremendously. Jadon and I will handle the rest. I can assure you, no one is going to take us unawares, knock us out, and shove us onto an abandoned planet without you."

It hadn't even occurred to me that the same people who took out my fathers would come after my mates. Of course, *now* it did. Anxiety crept up my back. "Are my fathers bad Wolf-shifters? Not strong or whatever?"

Jadon and Carl looked at each other, then the Alpha answered me. "They seem pretty strong. They do an incredible amount of work in space, which isn't easy. I don't know how they fight, per se, but really only Alphas and Enforcers are good at that."

Alfie threw his shoe at Jadon. "I can fight, too, asshat."

Some of the mood lightened. I sighed. "Let's just be extra careful when I meet your pack tomorrow."

"*Our* pack." Jadon kissed me. "And they're never going to let anyone hurt you, either. It's time to change things on Planet Wolf. It starts with us, but it won't end with us."



I WAS ACTUALLY awake before the guys the next morning. I lay on the veranda to watch the sunrise. Usually, I didn't have the energy to be up so early, not unless I absolutely had to be, but I had enough sleep, surprisingly. Why not watch the beautiful colors fill the sky?

Carl stumbled out, rubbing his eyes before he lay down next to me on the lovely outdoor sofa. "You weren't where

you were supposed to be.”

“How long did it take you to sniff me out?”

He breathed in my hair before he rubbed his finger over his mating mark on my neck. “Half a second, maybe.”

“You’re the best tracker in the universe. I was sure you could find me.” I leaned up against him. “The colors are different here. I haven’t seen the sun rise very much on Earth, but I know it wasn’t quite so purple.”

Carl leaned down on my shoulder, closing his eyes. “Too early.”

He was not a morning Wolf. “You aren’t going to appreciate the beauty of a new day with me?”

His answer was a snore in my ear. I laughed and went back to watching the sky. I hadn’t given any thought to that folder I’d been handed on my way out of Earth. I needed to do something with that. My head was clearer than it had been before, so for the first time, I could think about it without even a struggle.

Men and women all over the galaxy fled their home planets for the same reasons that screwed with my life. I couldn’t do anything about politics, but I could take the Union out of the equation.

I kissed Carl’s neck. “I need to borrow your tablet.”

He groaned and wrenched his eyes open. “Of course. Take it. I’ll get you your own today. But, for now, it’s inside, in the kitchen. Hold on, I’ll get it.”

“No.” He was adorable. “I’ll get it. You lay there and sleep. I’ll be right back.”

He closed his eyes. “Okay.”

I went inside and turned toward the fridge to grab some juice while I was grabbing the tablet. I was halfway through drinking it when it occurred to me that I should probably not be ingesting it without thought. I didn’t want to start the beautiful day by puking.

I set it down and went back out to Carl before I realized I needed to also use the glasses that would let me read his tablet. Those were harder to find, but I found them on Jadon's desk. By the time I came back outside, the sun had risen and instead it was the early morning glow of daybreak. *How lovely to see that, too.*

Wearing the glasses, I set out to compose an email that night, I hoped, change things. My cousin wasn't going to be the new leader after the Union left, but someone would be. Even from a distance, I could give them what they needed. Publicly.

I started composing my letter to an editor. Sometimes, the Silver newspaper could really make a difference and with a letter and proof like I had—they'd distribute it widely. Earth wouldn't stay silent when confronted with this kind of damning evidence.

I hoped.

"Hey," Alfie pushed in next to me on the other side. It was good that the chair was so big. He laid his head down like Carl had done. "Missed you in bed. Why did you wake him and not me?" He closed his eyes.

"I didn't. He found me out here, too. I was awake, really awake, and I wanted to see the sun rise."

He lifted his gaze. "That is very good news. Stay here a second."

He jumped up, and Carl opened his eyes to complain, "Why are the two of you running around so much? It's morning. Lie still and don't move."

"Don't mind him," Jadon said as he came out, holding their version of coffee. "He doesn't like the morning. Do you think your early morning energy is maybe because of the vitamin Alfie fed you?"

"Yep." Alfie slid past him and darted over to me, holding the pill in honey again. "Time for more. We can maybe give you some more before bed, too, if you're handling it."

I happily popped it in my mouth. It might become my favorite taste ever. “It’s so delicious.”

“It’s the honey. The vitamin is tasteless.” He stretched his arms over his head. “Are you guys sticking around an hour or so? I need a run. I need to shift.”

I wondered what that would be like. I’d spend my life watching them run off as Wolves, but at least I got to have views like I had this morning.

As the last car drove away from our home, I leaned against the door and waved. I never would've expected it, but I liked every member of the pack. Or maybe I should have expected it. I liked my guys, and they made all of those people—mostly men—their family. The three women in the pack were particularly wonderful. They invited me out, and one of them wanted to know all about Earth. She was convinced her true mates were there.

I had no idea how that would go for her. Earth men didn't share as well as my mates. Also, they couldn't scent her. How would that work? Would she let them know she scented them? We'd see what happened, and I hoped we could be friends.

Carl put his chin on my shoulder, watching them leave. "They loved you, all of them. I feel like you've given them a lot of hope, too. We're all made for true matings, yet most of us will go through life without ever finding that pairing. Seeing you? It reminds them what they should be striving for." He held up a cup with a honey candy on it. "Alfie asked me to give this to you."

I took it and happily sucked on it. "This is my favorite food every day."

"That's because you're getting what you need." He kissed my cheek. "Alfie will probably start to add more to your diet, too. You kept down juice. That is good news, and we can try some other things, slowly. Before you know it, you'll be able to eat whatever you like."

That would be a fucking miracle. “I can’t imagine being able to just eat.”

I still had pain. I hadn’t woken up just fixed. My body hurt. I wasn’t going to think about going off my pills, maybe I never would. If I could eat, it would add to my quality of life in a way I wasn’t sure I could express, not even to myself. I didn’t have a clue what that would be like, as I honestly never experienced it before.

Alfie ran off earlier to go into town to get some supplies he needed. Apparently, he also wanted to visit somewhere called the Institute of Health. He hoped they’d have information he couldn’t access from his home computer because it was blocked by security features.

I yawned and Jadon came over to hold me from behind as Carl let go to step outside. “Going to patrol,” the latter informed me.

“Hey, I have a question.” I leaned back against the Alpha, and he kissed his mark on my neck.

“I’m shocked you only have one. As Carl told you, every single one of them loved you. What’s your question?”

I turned in his arms. “What are all of those people who just left going to do now?”

Jadon tilted his head and looked at me with a question in his gaze. He seemed to consider my concern for a moment before he spoke. “They’ll go back to their lives, return to their jobs, their homes, and visit their families. They’ll live the same as they did yesterday, but they’ll have something to dream about and work toward.”

I nodded, understanding what he meant. “I guess I meant more generally—what will they do right now? Will they go have fun? Attend parties? Bars? What do they do when they leave here tonight?”

Jadon’s arms tightened around me, and I leaned into his embrace. Did he understand what I was asking him? I wanted to know what they were doing, because I would never be able to do those things. As long as half the planet wanted to kill

humans for being there, I couldn't do anything like that. Maybe I'd be able to eat again, thanks to the vitamin I was taking, only I wouldn't be able to even take my medication safely in public. What was the point of making me well if I had to live as I had before?

Jadon's eyes softened as he looked down at me. I could tell he understood the true meaning behind my question. It hadn't taken him long to catch on. "They'll do what they always do, yes. Maybe they'll go to bars or the theater or parties. As for us, we'll make our own fun here. We'll go on moonlit runs, have bonfires, and share stories. We'll make our own memories and live in the moment."

Well, *they* could go on moonlit runs. I'd stay just as I was, in my human form. I could watch them on a moonlit run, though. He was used to thinking of everyone being just like him. It would never occur to him to think of me as other. I was afraid he'd get used to it very fast.

Jadon leaned down to kiss me, his lips soft against mine. "You make everything wonderful."

Did I? My stomach panged. Maybe it was my usual trouble or maybe it was just that nothing ever really went as planned for me.



MY WHOLE BODY HURT. I walked to the kitchen, once again awake before my mates—that had happened every day for the last week—and tried not to wince with every step. It was bad, the kind of pain that usually ended up with me having a seizure or being put in the hospital.

I wanted more to drink, thirst forcing me to seek water. I guessed I could have just taken it from the bathroom, but damn it, I wanted to drink from a glass like a civilized person. Standing in the doorway of the kitchen, I couldn't go a step further. What would happen to me? Would I get sent to a hospital? Would they treat me? Or could Alfie help me from home? He was out cold in the guest room tonight. I left Jadon

and Carl in bed asleep. They'd started a rotating schedule I hadn't caught onto yet. It wasn't as easy as just moving them through; they had specific times they wanted.

I sunk to the floor, my legs unable to hold me. Carl would be up first. He always was, so he'd come to find me, and then I'd be okay. I just needed to wait.

That thought sustained me for ten seconds. That was the thing about pain. You could only ignore it for so long. I had to call one of them—Alfie, Jadon or Carl. I just had to have help. *This really sucks.* They were so excited because I seemed to be getting better, so my reversion to my former condition would be a huge disappointment.

As I sat there, the pain in my body only got tremendously worse. I couldn't hold back the tears that streamed down my face at the cramping or the joint pain. The guys were in the other rooms, not far away at all, yet I was alone—and agony was only getting worse. How had I gone from the joy of yesterday, when Jadon and I had burned meat together trying to grill it, to this hell?

Footsteps approached, and I looked up to see Carl rush toward me, concern evident in the slope of his eyebrows. "What's wrong? Are you okay?" he asked, kneeling beside me and taking my hand.

I shook my head, trying to speak past the sobs that racked my body. "I... I don't know. The pain, it's really fucking bad," I managed to choke out.

Carl's eyes widened, and he shouted over his shoulder, "Alfie, we need you here, now!" He practically growled. "You smell wrong. I can't... explain it."

Jadon appeared beside us, and he reached down to stroke my head. "What's going on?"

"It's her pain. It's too much," Carl said. "And something else? I don't know."

Jadon took a deep breath. "What is happening?"

"I don't know." Carl shook his head. "Alfie will fix this."

The healer suddenly appeared next to me on his knees. “Esther.”

“Fix this,” Jadon bellowed at him. “She’s in agony.”

“Yes.” He didn’t sound terrified or angry like Jadon. “She is. And that is unfortunately normal. Use your nose wisely, guys. What do you smell? You’ve scented it before. Esther, you’re going to shift.”

I’m going to what? I no sooner thought it than my body started to shake, a fine trembling starting at my muscles. *Oh, hell, I’m going to have a seizure.*

Alfie got down on his stomach. What was he doing? “Don’t fight it, okay? Let it happen. You’ve never been able to do it before, but you can now. And when you do, all this pain? It’s going to stop. Scream if you want to. Bellow at the top of your lungs, but you are about to become a Wolf, my love. Like you should have always been.”

“It’s like a miracle,” Carl said and kissed my head. That was the last thing I could think about. My bones cracked and my muscles stretched until they tore. He had said to yell, and I would have, if I hadn’t been pretty sure I was about to die. My throat closed up and then...

Everything looked different. Alfie lifted his head to look behind me. His hair was different, shinier, but also, he smelled like trees. *How did I know that?* I wasn’t sure. “It’s the vitamin. She’s never had enough to do this. Esther’s never going to make enough herself. She’s going to have to get it every day, but if she does, she’ll be able to do this.” He took a breath. “Her pain is gone.”

“Yes, but she’s terrified.” Jadon got down on all fours. “Esther, listen, you’re going to lose all sense of this soon. You’re just going to be a Wolf. That’s okay. Look for me. All of us, but if you can find me, I will take care of you. Somehow, you’ll know that. Alphas take care of the pack. You are ours. Don’t lose sense of that, if you can hang onto it.”

I had a second to wonder why he thought I wouldn’t be able to find him so that I’d have to look before I decided I

couldn't stay in the kitchen. I ran. I had to be outside. Every door in the house had what was essentially a doggy-door to get outside. I took one, and headed out toward the woods. Outside was *so* much better than inside.

Maybe I didn't have to go back inside ever. I ran and ran as fast as I could. But I was alone. I didn't want to be alone. Someone was supposed to be with me. More than one person. I had family, loves.

A mouth came down on my neck, stopping me from running. The Wolf who did it didn't even seem winded. I took a breath. Oh yes, he was my Alpha. I whimpered. Was I in trouble? He growled, but it wasn't with anger. He didn't like that I thought I was in trouble. I lifted my gaze. Okay, everything was fine.

Someone bumped me from the side, another male. He was also mine. Yes, they both were. And then the third one arrived. Oh, thank goodness, I could breathe again. *They are here.* I ran and they followed, caging me in a bit, but it was nice, not stifling. We ran and ran.

Until I just couldn't anymore. I collapsed on the ground. Catching my breath, my body trembled as it reshaped. What was happening? I whimpered and then cried. Seconds later, I was back in my human body.

Naked, I lay on the grass staring at the sky. The sun had come up again. It always did, which was an amazing gift. Tears rushed down my cheeks. Carl looked down at me from where he stood, essentially over me. "That was fast. Pain must be over." He lifted me up. "What are the tears?"

These guys would never really understand weakness, even though they wanted to. "Overwhelmed, I think."

All three of them were back in their human forms, and beautifully naked. Alfie smiled at me. "You smell like your pain has ended. Yes, it was fast, but you probably had just enough resources to manage that long a shift. I don't know how it's going to work for you. If you'll need to have enough each time to run for that long and won't be able to or if you'll be able to really start to store it, save it, and shift for longer. I

just have no idea, because I swear no two half-breeds are ever the same. Every one is unique, and you are, too. We'll figure it out with you."

I pulled my knees to my chest. "You know, the thing is, I don't know that I will be. What you're describing really doesn't sound very fun. Maybe I'm being selfish and nasty. A spoiled brat." Jadon knelt down, but when he would have spoken, I kept going. "You were raised expecting to shift, to become a Wolf. I wasn't. No one told me that could happen to me, yet here I am, shifting. Maybe I should feel joyful, but I just feel exhausted. I'm going to feel better, shift again, feel lousy, and start the whole cycle again? I didn't love being a Wolf. It didn't feel like I'd suddenly experienced half of myself that I'd been missing. I was just confused." I wiped at my eyes. "And you bit me, didn't you?" That was to Jadon directly.

"Well, my Wolf wanted your Wolf's attention. You weren't giving it to him, so yes, he nipped you, but he didn't even draw blood. That's what they do. He bit the shit out of Carl last week. That time, he did draw blood."

Carl shrugged. "Whatever. I don't think it hurt him."

It was so interesting, how they were talking about it. "Do you actually feel separate from your Wolf?"

They looked at each other. "Sort of," Alfie answered. "Like, when I needed a run recently, I became aware of him in my human head. But, yes, for the most part, they're separate. Wasn't it like that for you?"

"Not really. I was still me. I could still think. There were things that were confusing—like, I didn't know your names, just who you were in relation to me, but I was still me in there."

Alfie touched my forehead. "Nice and cool. That's interesting. I'll see if I can find any information on that happening to anyone else. In fact, that's exactly what I need to do. There have to be other half-breeds around, even if they're not here. I have to find out what their situations are and how they're treated. I'll find out, learn all about them."

“Another thing,” I really was on a rant now. “I *hate* that term. Half-breed? It’s derogatory. It’s nasty. We need something else to call it, because half-breed makes me feel mad and aggravated every time I hear it. You say you’re not anti-human and you want us here? Fine, but you can’t show it by using a term that already implies otherness and less than.”

Carl looked at Jadon. “She’s right. She’s absolutely right.”

“We’ll come up with something else and use it. Thank you for pointing that out, mate.” Jadon picked me up in his arms. “We used that term because it was always used, but that doesn’t make it okay that we didn’t recognize it was wrong. Forgive me?”

I nodded. “Of course I forgive you. You don’t have hate in your hearts. I’m just... a mess. I don’t know if I can spend the rest of my life hiding in this house making our own fun if the things that we do for fun aren’t fun for me.” I shook my head. “It was one thing when I was feeling sick, or *am* feeling sick, like right now. It’s going to be something else entirely when I’m feeling okay. I want to be able to just live like a normal person here.”

“I’m sorry. We haven’t been thinking about that,” Carl stroked my hair as we walked back to the house. “Forgive us. We only want your happiness, above all things.”

“And now I feel even worse.” I buried my head in Jadon’s shoulder. He took care of problems, kept people safe, but there was no way he could fix a bitchy, complaining mate. All they wanted was my happiness. I wanted theirs, too—so much—yet all I could see were problems. Maybe I wasn’t being fair to myself? Maybe I was just being truthful, for once. I spent my whole life trying to make everyone around me comfortable with what was wrong with me. I wouldn’t do that anymore. Everyone was just going to have to deal with it.

I sniffed. “This is what I’m like, sometimes.”

“We love everything about you.” Alfie stroked my back. “And if anyone has the right to complain about things, it’s you.”

Was that true? I'd never thought about it that way. "I guess there will just be no juice for me today."

"Let's see how you feel after we get you your vitamins."



DAYS PASSED, and I hardly saw Alfie at all. Carl and Jadon were training to take out their father, but at least they were around. My freak out after my shift had set Alfie off. He had to find answers, and he wouldn't rest until he did. I missed him, though, despite his magical vitamins making me able to eat enough.

I stared out the window as the mate I missed ran through the door. "We're going to try something."

"Hello," I wrapped my arms around him, thrilled to see him, and he sighed. "I did it again. Too much healing, not enough telling you that I love you."

I kissed him, the taste of his lips sustaining me. He hadn't slept with me all week. "I know that you love me. It's why you're making yourself nuts."

He shook his head. "I promised you we'd fix it, and I am doing my best to try. I got a hold of a person who is half Wolf, half human who lives on that planet with the woman you communicate with, Jessica. She's mated to those Bears."

They'd fixed how they talked about me, but I was never going to get them to stop making the face like something tasted bad when they talked about the Bears or the Cats.

"That open planet, with no discrimination against whoever wants to live there?"

He nodded. "I doubt it is that much of a utopia, but that's neither here nor there at the moment. Anyway, he reminded me that you're half-human as much as you're half-Wolf. I was only thinking about the Wolf side, not the human part. I apologize. Normal humans' kidneys can filter things out that they don't need or get too much of. Not everything, but it turns out..." He held up the vitamin. "... you can filter this out. We

can't overdose you, so we're going to give it to you differently. If it makes you nauseated or sick, we'll stop. Sit down. It's going to be an infusion. I'll throw in other vitamins in there, too. It'll keep you really hydrated."

That would be amazing, if it worked. "So I'd always have enough? I couldn't run through it by shifting?"

"The young man I spoke to can shift as he likes, and he doesn't feel sick anymore. He knows how you're feeling. He felt like that for years, too. We're going to try it. If it doesn't work, that's okay, we'll keep trying."

I was up for anything. "I do it every day?"

"For a while. He only has to do it twice a week now."

I followed him from the room, admiring the way his ass looked in his pants. "No more honey on my vitamin every day?"

"You're sweet enough, you don't need any more honey. If you want some, I'll feed it to you." He smiled. "I'll feed you some and then lick it off your body."

There he is. I was glad to have my Alfie back.



"MY FATHER IS COMING OVER." Jadon stormed into the room when I was bathing. "I don't know what the fuck he wants, but he's not getting it."

I took his hand, drawing him toward me as I got out of the tub. "When is he coming?"

He blinked. "Sorry, I wasn't clear about that. Now. He's coming now."

"Should we put out food?" It was what my grandmother would have done. Even if an enemy came over, you fed them. It was classy and showed you weren't intimidated by them.

Jadon laughed. "I don't want to offer him bread; I want to kill him. He's made it so impossibly hard on you that I can't

even take you downtown to go see the theater or feed you in public. I want to tear his head from his body.”

“Maybe he’s coming to try to make things right.” I highly doubted it. “In any case, we have to feed him. I’ll get it set up.”

I felt pretty wonderful most of the day. Two days of the infusions had made me feel full inside. I hoped I didn’t have to shift without conscious thought again. At least I’d know what was happening, if it did happen. I toweled off and then went at my hair. I’d get this done. If they all had to wait for me, then so be it. That might be mysterious. I stared at my reflection in the mirror. My color was better. I might actually be gaining some weight.

I looked a little bit curvy. “Look, I have breasts.”

Jadon caught his breath. “I’m fully aware of your breasts. Always have been. And I can’t think about them now. Damn.”

“I’ll get dressed and come out.” I smiled as I watched him leave. He might not be able to think about my breasts right then, but mentioning them altered his mood. Now he might not kill his father in our kitchen and actually wait for the challenge. Why *was* that man coming here now?

I put on a black dress that Carl brought me from town. It was short and casual. I put on the comfortable shoes I’d been wearing since I arrived.

Carl was in the kitchen cutting something that resembled tomatoes. “Are we really feeding him?”

“Not necessarily. We’ll have food out, but I’m not suggesting we actually have him sit down to eat.”

He looked over his shoulder, his lips turned in a half frown. “Then why am I cutting these?”

“I don’t know. I wasn’t going to use that kind of energy. I was just going to put out some cheese. Bread. Nice and easy.” I scooted him over. “Thank you for helping me.”

He kissed my cheek. “Always.”

The sound of a car caught my attention, and I lifted my head.

I turned to my mate, wiping my hands off on a towel. “Go, greet him. I’ll be in here, and I’ll come greet him in a bit, unless you indicate to me that it’s not safe.”

“You’re really good at this. What a gift you are. I’d just pounce on him and beat the shit out of him. Forget politics. I guess we can’t do that. See you in just a second.”

Alfie entered and leaned against the counter. “I’m not greeting him.” He took a deep breath. “Oh, smell that? My father is here, too. I’m *really* not going now.”

“Grab me a plate.” He did as I asked. “Thanks.”

“Of course.” Our interaction felt so normal. I loved it, just us in the kitchen. I’d love to have someone there other than their dads, but it was nice to have company.

Alfie winced. “Jadon and his dad are fighting. Hard. They’re yelling at each other.” He shook his head. “My dad is yelling for me. Carl won’t let him come in the kitchen.”

Maybe I needed some more cheese.

Everything suddenly happened so fast, I couldn't keep track of things. There were howls. Wolves came out of nowhere. Alfie jumped to his feet. *How did they get here undetected?* We heard cars approach from miles away, so no way would my men have not heard the Wolves or smelled them coming.

But there they were, and they launched themselves on my healer. In the other room, it sounded as though the other guys were fighting as well. Alfie couldn't shift. They had him down, and maybe whatever they had done to make him not know they were coming also stopped him from doing what he had to do.

I could shift, only I was too terrified to consider it. I shook and begged my body to do something. Anything. Frozen with fear was suddenly an expression I understood.

Jadon's father strolled into the kitchen like the entire situation was no big deal. "If this stops right now, they're too injured to do anything about it. I'll put them on a shuttle and send them away. If it goes on another minute, they're dead. All you have to do is cooperate."

I nodded. That I could do. He wanted to send them away. He'd done the same thing to my fathers. Sure. Let him do that. I wasn't my mother—I'd leave Earth to find them. Now that we knew there were things to be done, he couldn't stop me, not for long. "Whatever you want," I agreed easily. After all, one of my men was the best tracker in the galaxy.

“Good girl.”

One of the Wolves leaped on me, and I hit the floor hard, head first. Everything went black.

I woke up on the ground outside of the cave where I’d spent the night with the guys all those months ago when we’d been stranded on Planet Wolf. Alone—why had they put me there? They should have taken me off planet. That’s what they did to my mom, anyway.

Okay. Things were different, apparently. My head rang. *This would be okay.* There was no way that the guys wouldn’t come get me as soon as they woke up wherever they were taken. I shook my head. *Fuck. That could be years.*

I had to think. I was alone in the woods with nothing to help me survive except my wits. His father left me here because he was sure I would die, I knew it. Of course, his father didn’t know I could shift. That was a plus from the last time I’d been there, but the only plus. My last visit to the cave involved me being surrounded by men who already loved me, even though I didn’t know it yet.

That thought made me cry, and it was everything I could do to suck them back after the tears started to fall. I wasn’t a baby. *I can do this.*

Somehow.

I could shift but probably only once after one week’s worth of infusions. That wasn’t going to last me years in the woods, so I had to be smart about it. I’d eat the pigs, when I could find them, because I could get some vitamin from them. Of course that meant I would need to kill the pig, and to do that, I had to shift.

Past the complications of the situation, my emotional state wasn’t the best. I missed them, the pain of being apart like a wound in my chest. I struggled to my feet. His father left me there to die. People expected me to die my whole life, and I was good at beating odds. I would make it through, and I wouldn’t shift until I had to. Hopefully, I could hold on long

enough to avoid the seizures, but I'd lived with pain. I could do it again.

With my back stiff, I got busy getting busy.

By nightfall, I gave up on trying to make a fire, despite trying for hours, and I shivered in the cave. I would have to shift or I wouldn't survive the cold.

Okay. I have no choice. I would...

A sound caught my attention before my guys stumbled into the clearing at the mouth of the cave. They were still pretty beat up. I jumped, startled and for a second, not sure if I imagined them. "How are you guys here?"

Alfie rushed over to me. "Don't ever trade yourself for me, do you understand? Not ever again."

They were all talking to me then, and I couldn't understand any of it. "You're supposed to be on a ship."

"No one beats me." Jadon frowned. "I can see why you'd think they had, given what happened, but no, we won. Even Alfie here managed to beat them back, once he shifted."

They didn't look like it had been so easy, but maybe I wouldn't mention how battered they looked right then. "How did you not hear them coming?"

Carl sighed. "Pretty sure we were slightly drugged. It's a scentless odor that makes us sort of loopy. It's also completely illegal."

Everything was stacked against us, but at least they were there. "How did you find me?"

Their smiles were huge, and it was Carl again who answered. "I'll *always* find you."

"But, seriously, we beat the shit out of several of them until we were told where you'd been taken. Sorry it took a minute. How are you feeling?" Alfie lifted a bag. "I have all of your meds and more of the vitamin."

How was I? "I think I'm okay for now but... I can't live like this." It was hard to admit it. I wanted them to be happy

beyond anything else in the world, I really did, but there was a line, and it had been crossed. *If they'd died, this would be a very different night.*

“I agree.” Jadon looked away. “I think it was ego, Esther. I was sure I could fix things. That I could simply will things the way that I wanted them to be. I’m sorry. I almost lost you and that can’t happen. Ever. So... I think, if you are amenable, we’ll go to that planet with the other non-conforming shifters. If everyone is welcome there, we’ll go there.”

I threw my arms around him and held on. “If it’s awful, we’ll come back and just hide.”

“No,” he kissed my neck, “I’m never hiding you. I’m never hiding anything about us ever again.”

Okay, I could be very, very okay with that. I held on tighter and breathed them in. Alfie and Carl both snuggled up against me. *We’ll make this work. Somehow.*



One year later...

“You okay?” I sat down next to my mother. I couldn’t quite comprehend what I’d read that morning. The Union fell on Earth, since the info I sent proved hugely helpful. We’d have to see what came next, but it was a start.

My mom looked up, blinked, and her eyes cleared. She’d never be entirely okay, but she was better than I ever dared hope she could be. “I am. I just get lost sometimes. Are *you* okay?” She pointed at my belly. “My daughter is going to be a mother, and I’m still trying to wrap my mind around it. You were just a baby yesterday.”

The years she’d lost remained mostly unclear to her. She accepted they’d happened, but it was hard for her. I was a baby when last she could clearly remember. Sometimes she didn’t know who I was, still. We were working it all out one day at a time.

My father, Paul, sat down next to her. We’d determined he was my biological father—not that it mattered, but it was interesting. “My girls okay?”

“We are.” I got up, rubbing my hand across my stomach automatically. It was painful for mates to be far from each other for very long. I understood that quite well, too, because that’s how it was with my guys.

My cousin Patrice bounced her baby on her lap and laughed at something her husband said. My family was pretty much all on planet with us. The Union falling was a gift, but it left a void of power on Earth. Things were violent. It was better we were all here, safe, better we were together. And the surprise in my belly offered a small piece of joy we hadn’t seen coming.

Jadon scooped me up from behind and I screeched. “You’re supposed to be resting. Alfie doesn’t like how swollen your feet are.”

“Alfie doesn’t like anything about this pregnancy. It is frightening him.”

“Yes, that’s right,” Alfie agreed as he appeared next to me. “So go lie down. Let me worry a little bit less about you and the baby.”

Carl jumped on the bed as we entered. “You two are ninnies. She is doing great, and so is the little one. This is *Esther*. She is a survivor, and she makes everything better just by being her.”

Jadon pointed at the bed, then gestured with his thumb in a *get out* motion. “She can’t rest if you’re jumping on it.”

“I know.” He kept jumping, utterly unrepentant. “Let her off her leash, you two.”

I grinned. I’d take this kind of banter from my three Wolves any day of the week. Planet Wolf hadn’t worked out for us, but we’d brought the heart of the planet with us. This could be home.

Home was with them, wherever we might be.

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