

CHRYSLIS PACK BOOK ONE

THESE
VICIOUS
WOLVES

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER AUTHOR

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SCARLETT SNOW

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CHRYSLIS PACK SERIES

BOOK ONE

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QUOTE

“Your mother did not raise you with a wolf in your chest so you could howl over a man.”- Unknown.

These Vicious Wolves
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DESCRIPTION



Fated mates don't exist in my world—not until two alphas claim that I'm theirs.

Abandoned at birth, I've grown up believing I was worthless until my sixteenth birthday when I discovered I was an Omega. Since Omegas are rare and hunted by alphas to increase their power, I'm given to the future alpha of the Solarius pack—a vicious wolf who treats me worse than his father ever did.

The night the fae attack, I'm seen by another, much stronger alpha—one who claims I'm his fated mate.

But that's impossible and not something I want.

Elias takes me with him regardless, determined to win me over despite the walls I've spent years building around myself.

When another alpha claims I'm fated to him, too, my Omega instincts rise to the surface for the first time, and with each day that passes, I want nothing more than to surrender myself to them.

To let them claim me.

My only refuge is in the shadows of a dungeon where the mysterious fae prisoner says I owe him a debt. I know all fae are evil and dangerous, but there's something about Rueven I can't resist.

Wolves and fae have always been at war with each other, and the moon and star gods are forever watching. But maybe if I help Rueven escape, then the war between our species might finally end.

These Vicious Wolves is a full-length Omegaverse romance with possessive alpha males, found family, strong female characters, and a main character who doesn't have to choose. This is book one in the Chrysalis Pack series.

CHAPTER
ONE



Wolves are going to starve tonight if my hunt fails again.

I hold my breath and follow the black beast with the tip of my rusted arrow. The stag-like creature moves slowly across the frozen meadow, searching for the grass hidden beneath the snow that forever coats this land. I've been tracking my prey for days now, but I never expected it to be a whiteling. The fae believe them to be a symbol of hope and transformation, which is why the leaves on their antlers change colour depending on the season.

Green for spring, yellow for summer, red for autumn, and a deep icy blue for winter.

Their leaves are never silver, and their coats are never black. Not like this one.

I lower my arm, my stomach twisting at the thought of killing the rare whiteling. In a sad way, we're not that different from each other. Neither of us belong down here. We're both outcasts, and had our roles been reversed, I'm certain the Solarius wolves wouldn't hesitate to kill me. Only, I wouldn't be food to them.

I'd be a lesson to those like me who don't belong in their world.

A gust of wind sweeps through the meadow, lifting my long dark hair over my shoulders. I have only seconds before the whiteling picks up my scent and runs away. I quickly refocus my aim, reminding myself why I must do this. It's not

just for me but for my family. Its hide alone could feed the three of us for months if we rationed it enough.

If the alpha doesn't steal it from us first.

I prepare to release the arrow, knowing I have no other choice. But the way the creature continues grazing as though unfazed by my presence stops me.

"What are you doing?" My whisper clouds the air with smoke as the whiteling raises its head, its ears twitching to the side. Still it doesn't move. I frown at it. "Why don't you run?"

I need it to run. It's the only way I'll feel less like a monster when I kill it.

But the whiteling just stares at me with its big gold eyes, almost like it's looking right at me. Kris once said my heart is too soft to kill and maybe she was right. I don't want to kill this beautiful creature, but if I don't, we might not make it through the winter.

Our survival matters more to me than anything.

I'm sorry but I have to do this.

Snow crunching underfoot drags my attention away from the meadow. I snap my head to the side where a large white wolf approaches the beast slowly. Its head is bent low and its ears are flat against its skull, ready to strike. I know who the wolf is from the medallion around his neck.

Bane. The alpha's son.

My future *mate*.

My skin crawls at the sight of him. I flick my gaze back to the whiteling and finally go to kill it. My arrow will be a mercy compared to what Bane will do to it. However, when the future alpha of the Solarius pack lunges over me, forcing me to duck away from him, three more wolves join him at opposite sides of the meadow, and I quickly realise my hunting trip has turned into a slaughter. I should have killed the beast when I had a chance.

Sweat trickles down my spine as I nock another arrow, searching for a clear path. Too many wolves block the way. I

won't reach the whiteling in time. The wolf closest to the whiteling claws at its rear while another snaps at its heels, forcing it backward into their trap. I move my focus to them and let my arrow glide through my fingers. It whistles through the air, and a sharp yelp soon follows. The wolf who swiped first falls back, howling, as the tip of my arrow pierces his paw.

Serves the bastard right.

I grab another arrow and aim for the wolf directly in my line of sight. I might not reach the beast in time, but I could put an arrow in my future alpha's ass, and that's far more satisfying. Curling my lips into a grin, I let go of the arrow.

My aim is tilted as a sudden impact slams into my back, driving me into the snow. I gasp under the heavy weight and turn my head to see what's holding me down. Korven, the alpha's beta and Bane's bodyguard, growls at me as he adds just the slightest bit of pressure to my back in clear warning. Move and I'll break you. This isn't the first time Korven has pinned me down like this. Even if I could shift into my wolf, I don't stand a chance against him. He's too strong.

I BLINK BACK my tears of rage as I'm forced to watch Bane rip the whiteling into pieces. Its dying wails burn a gut-wrenching hole into the back of my mind, forever bound there in a web of guilt, because I let this happen. Me.

My stupid, pathetic soft heart.

When at last its pain-filled cries are replaced with silence, Korven steps away and I'm finally able to breathe again. I dig my hands into the snow, my arms and legs trembling, and push up to my feet. My gaze lands on the alpha's son. He prowls toward me with his head held obnoxiously high. Blood trickles from his mouth down to his chest and a silver leaf clings to a gash on his throat. At least the beast managed to land some blows before it was killed. But that gash will never be enough.

It'll never be a match for the extent of my hatred for this very wolf prowling towards me.

He shifts back before reaching my side and his male form is only slightly taller than my own. The way his lips curl into a smug grin makes me want to reach out and claw at his face. He looks every bit like his father—the strong jawline, sharp cheekbones, eyes like ice, and the white-blond hair shaved at the sides. Every inch of his face is flawless and smooth, not a single scar unlike the wolves who do all his dirty work for him.

My foster mother, Mera, once said that the gods had to balance out the alpha and his son with cruelty because they blessed them with so much beauty.

“What’s wrong, darlin’?” Bane’s grin widens. “Got a problem with the way I hunt?”

I peel my lips back in disgust. “You didn’t hunt it. You *slaughtered* it. And yeah, I’ve got a problem with a lot of things,” I say, casting a pointed look at his groin. “Darlin’.”

The insult lands beautifully and Bane’s eyes fill with rage. He raises his hand to strike me but stops when a voice calls out to him.

“Only weak males hit defenceless females. Are you trying to prove how weak you are, alpha’s son?”

Mera’s voice brings a smile to my face. Bane is never this stupid in public. He usually keeps his hatred for me at bay, unless we’re alone, then he makes it clear how deep his hatred runs. Up until a few months ago, that was, when something in me cracked and I took a dagger to his precious manhood. One little knick, and the future alpha yelped louder than a litter of pups.

I saw fear in his eyes for the first time that day, and it was glorious.

I would’ve tried to cut his dick off sooner if I wasn’t so scared he’d starve my family more than his father was already doing. He often threatened to do that to keep me under his control. But that night, I finally realised he would always use my loved ones as a weapon against me. I refused to let anyone

turn my love for them into a weakness when they're the only ones who give me strength to get out of bed every day.

Although we might not be related by blood, they *are* my family. Mera will always be my foster mother and Kris my slightly annoying but incredibly loveable little sister. They're the best things to ever happen to me and I won't let Bane, or anyone else for that matter, take that from me.

Bane lowers his hand, his eyes incinerating. But for once, his fury doesn't make me cower like it used to. I've had enough of cowering from wolves like him.

I will never cower from a man again.

When Mera stops beside us, she towers above everyone else. She used to be the best hunter the pack had ever seen until she broke her back a few years ago. She's since become our healer like her mother was before her, and as much as the alpha hates to admit it, he needs her because no one knows these snow lands better than Mera Redrook.

"My future mate insulted me," Bane snarls. "I was merely reminding her of her place."

"Perhaps it's you who should be reminded of your place?" Mera's voice is calm, but there's a distinct edge to it that makes Bane's hackles visibly rise. "As our future alpha, it's your job to protect this pack. Do you want them to think of you as a weak leader?" Her gaze cuts over to the beast and then back again. "A wasteful one?"

A tense silence stretches between them, punctuated only by the sound of the injured wolf whining about his stupid paw. Bane glares at Mera while Mera looks down at him in that calm, collected way of hers that used to send Bane running with his tail between his legs when we were kids. But this time, Bane doesn't run. He does, however, realise his mistake.

A moment of fun for him could result in an uprising if word got back to the pack of his squandering. I'm beginning to think the gods blessed him with an equal amount of stupidity as well as beauty and cruelty. What a total dumbass.

Bane rips his gaze away from Mera and gives me a sharp glare before nodding to the beast. “Bring the remains!” Then, turning to the wolf I shot in the paw, he kicks him. “And stop fucking whining!”

The wolf hobbles to his feet while the others, now in their male forms, gather what remains of their slaughter. Korven and Mera glare at each other for several moments before the beta runs along after his future alpha.

Casting a final glance at the dead whiteling, I grab my bow and follow her back through the forest. She’s quiet as we walk among the snow-laden trees. It is not the first time she’s witnessed Bane raising a hand to me, and though she always puts him in his place, I know her hands are as much tied as my own. If she crosses too far over the line to protect me, she risks the alpha killing both of us. And Kris needs us to stay alive; she’s still too young. She wouldn’t survive in the pack without us.

It’s a fine line to tread, this dance in a field where battles are picked and not always won. We have to be careful. Cunning. To survive this pack, we need to be as shrewd as we are determined to survive—something Mera taught me long ago when she took me under her wing.

I fall into step with her, my mind straying to that fateful day ten years ago.

Some days, it feels like it was only yesterday when she found me living in the gutter and brought me to live with her. Other days, it feels like an eternity. One thing is for sure, though—Mera changed my life by giving me the two things I’ve always wanted in life.

A place to call my home, and a family to share it with.

Even on my bad days in this pack, Kris and Mera make life worth living.

“You should not have been hunting,” Mera says, pulling me from my thoughts.

Although her admonishment isn’t harsh, there’s a sharpness to it that conveys her annoyance. I understand why

she's annoyed with me. No-Shifts like me are not allowed to hunt in the alpha's woods. Something that's always made clear to me when the hunters set off. But following them was a risk worth taking if it meant we wouldn't spend another winter living off his scraps. We deserve better than that. We all do.

I've raised the argument multiple times with her to no avail, so I don't bother pushing it again. She knows where I stand. She'd just rather I followed the alpha's rules and kept out of trouble, and as my foster mother, I don't really blame her.

"I tried to stop them. I was too late."

Mera side-eyes me, a smile tugging at her lips. "I know. I heard that bastard Conner yelping a mile away." The smile vanishes as she focuses her gaze ahead. "I've never seen a whiteling this far south before." She ducks under the lopsided trees bending over the forest path. The weight of the snow on their branches causes them to droop down like veils of ice. "To have killed one so brutally—especially one as rare as that—it's an insult to the gods. We don't need to punish them. The gods will see to it."

I glance at the dawnlit sky peering through the gaps where snow has fallen off the branches. I can only hope Mera is right. Bane and his followers deserve to be punished for what they did to that poor creature. I follow Mera through the twisted trees, ducking to avoid the icicles.

"I read that whitelings usually travel in herds. Is that true?"

She nods, keeping her focus ahead. "It is rare for a whiteling to travel alone, especially to a land so flat and barren. Something must have brought it here. Perhaps it was someone's mount."

"But only fae are able to ride them." My heart skips a beat as I recall reading that in the bestiary Mera gave me when I took up hunting for the family. "Do you think there could be fae nearby?" Although fae haven't been sighted in this realm for over a hundred years—or so the Solarius pack believes—that doesn't make an attack from them impossible.

Crystals can only do so much against fae magic.

Mera shrugs. "Could be. But we're well prepared."

Replenishing our pack's crystals is one of the only things the alpha has done right, probably due to his ties to the Vaega pack since Bane's mother was from there. The Vaega wolves mine the crystals and then our pack creates charms with them. Together they help keep the fae away from our doorsteps. We'd be one of the richest packs out there if our alpha wasn't selfish and his pack too afraid to challenge him.

I glance at the white crystals wrapped around the tip of my bow. I used to think the whole crystal thing was nonsense since I'd never seen them used in the mortal realm. But the fact I've never encountered a fae inside this realm does make me wonder if something about the crystals' power is true. Either that, or the fae really don't like the snow up here.

I sling my bow over my shoulder and follow Mera down the path leading to the entrance of our pack. The tips of the palisades surrounding the perimeter are covered in thick piles of snow, briefly falling whenever someone walks by. The guard moving along the wall glances our way, and even in the extreme cold, he wears only trousers, boots, and a fur cloak that billows behind him. This isn't a stylistic choice. Our alpha's just too cheap.

He gestures to the guard at the entrance to lower the drawbridge. We wait several moments for the massive wooden structure to drop into the snow, then we pass through. A horse and cart follow us inside before the drawbridge is lifted again, sealing us inside.

The pack spreads out before us. Not for the first time, I wonder if the alpha will ever spend gold fixing the shattered glass windows, or the falling bricks and gaps in the walls of the local houses that line the barely ploughed roads. But he probably never will.

I look around the pack. There's more activity here than usual. Carts move around quickly, many of them leading to and from the alpha's home in the middle of the pack that overlooks everything else. Small alleyways hide the suffering

of most of his people who waste away within them, begging for his food. Whatever scraps he gives are brought to them on those very carts. But it's never enough.

I keep my eyes down, avoiding the usual glares always given my way until we pass the orphanage. The building has nearly collapsed in on itself, and the children are all in the yard outside, playing in the snow and with what broken bits of rubbish they can find.

Mera touches my arm and I jump, every instinct in my body telling me to help those kids. But we can't, we barely have enough to survive as it is, and Mera knows it rips me apart to have to walk by them every day.

I clear my throat and let Mera pull me away. More glares follow us as she walks into the market. Most of the pack still see me as nothing more than the No-Shift slave who was found in the mortal realm and dragged to live here. I was just a scrawny kid covered in fleas and disgusting in their eyes. But things changed a little when I came into my first heat.

I was found out to be an Omega, and in our world, Omegas are rare.

When bred with an alpha, we produce powerful heirs and that's all I've ever been to the alpha of this pack—a breeder for his son. I only accepted my fate because I thought I'd be able to protect Kris and pay Mera back for everything she's done for me.

We both made a promise that no matter what it takes, we're getting Kris out of here. If that means I need to spend my life trapped with Bane, and Mera as the alpha's healer, then we're both willing to do it. One day Kris will wake up in a different pack, a safe one, and she'll be free from all this. It will all be worth it.

I focus on the pebbled pathway, counting the broken and cracked stones as we walk. The market is unusually well-stocked this morning which makes it strange it's so quiet. There's barely anyone at the stalls. I nod at Torenn—one of the few vendors who doesn't despise me—but he just stares back at me while slowly shaking his head.

Okay. That was... weird.

I frown at his strange behaviour and look back at the road. Mera cuts through the market with long, heavy strides, and those who are here quickly move aside for her. I know for a fact no such courtesy would be shown to me if I wasn't beside her. They'd probably spit on me—Omega or not—if they had the chance.

Sometimes I think that's why Mera took me under her wing all those years ago. She knew my life in this pack would be difficult as a No-Shift. She's done everything to toughen me up to prepare me for it.

I guess that's why I've kept quiet about Bane hurting me. Mera has saved me so many times that for once I wanted to be the one to save her. If I just put up with Bane enough, if I just did what he wanted, then maybe he'd make her life better. But he just used it as leverage against me. Although he has sent extra scraps every week, and as humiliating as it is to accept them, it's helped us get by.

Our small home slowly appears within sight. Perched on a snowy hill at the edge of the pack, it's the only house to stand alone. It used to be Mera's hunting cabin. It isn't much, but like the rest of the pack, we've learned to make the best with what we have.

A candle flickers in the kitchen window and steam presses against the bow-style glass. Kris is home. I can smell her rabbit stew cooking on the hob even from all the way over here. My empty stomach grumbles at the thought of eating as I step onto the freshly shovelled path.

“Verena?”

I pause at hearing my name and glance over my shoulder. Mera stands unmoving at the front of the path, her eyes glistening at me. That alone makes me worried. I've never seen Mera shed a single tear in all the years I've known her. I've never even *heard* her cry, and we've lived together for over a decade. She never shows emotion like this. She looks at me for a moment.

“Some days I can’t believe how big you’ve grown,” she says, and a sad smile pulls at her lips. “Do you remember when I brought you here? You were covered in fleas, wearing a rag you wouldn’t wash a dog with. Just skin and bones. I didn’t think you’d make it through the night, yet you stood right here, where I am now, on this very path, and you asked me—”

“Do stars fall here,” I say, tears threatening my own eyes.

“Do stars fall here,” she repeats quietly. “You were obsessed with watching them. Every night you’d wait for one to shoot across the sky, telling me it was a god visiting us and that we should make a wish to them.” Her smile fades as she clenches her jaw. “I know it hasn’t always been easy for you here, but I... hope I gave you a little bit of home despite everything that’s happened.”

I wipe my eyes and sniffle, trying my best to hold myself together. “I found more than a little bit of home here. I found my family.”

Mera smiles again, but it still doesn’t reach her eyes. Her gaze darts to the house and then back to me again. The icy dread that crept over me a few moments ago returns tenfold. She’s reluctant to enter her own home. I clench my hands into fists and dig my nails into my palm.

“Okay, Mera. I know something is wrong. What is it?”

Mera shakes her head, her brows pulling tight together. “That’s the thing. I don’t know yet. Before I set off to find you, a box arrived, and it had the alpha’s seal on it.”

“The *alpha’s* seal?” I stare incredulously at her, my mouth suddenly drying. “Why would the alpha send me a box?”

“Whatever the reason, it can’t be good. I had Kris put it in your room.”

I glance back at the kitchen window, my stomach twisting into a knot. “Knowing Kris, she probably opened the box the moment you left.”

Mera huffs a laugh under her breath. “Probably.” She walks past me, her gaze hardening into its usual, icy

expression. “Let’s go find out what the asshole wants.”

I’d usually joke about how we shouldn’t call our alpha an asshole. *Alphacunt* is the correct title we use for him. In private, of course. But as my mind focuses on what could be inside the box, I don’t have it in me to joke. I feel like I’m about to be sick, and I have good reason to be feeling this way.

The last time the alpha sent me anything, it was a note announcing I would be mated to his son. I’d barely turned sixteen and he’d stripped me of my voice and forced me into a union I had no say over. I see now why Mera had been so reluctant to enter our home. She knew something was waiting for me.

She closes the front door and the smell of Kris’s stew simmering on the stove wafts into my senses. My mouth waters even despite my anxiety.

I ignore the protests rumbling from my stomach and head straight upstairs into my tiny bedroom. Mera follows me silently. My eyes immediately land on the white box sitting on the bottom of my bed. The red ribbon tied neatly around the front is broken by a folded parchment carrying a blood-red seal. I swallow back my unease and approach. While the seal remains unbroken, the box itself has already been pried open, revealing hints of fabric inside.

“Kristalis!”

Mera’s voice echoes around the room. Some moments later, Kris’s bedroom door creaks open, and then she pokes her head into my room. A sheepish grin dances over her lips.

“I’m sorry, I couldn’t resist. And to be fair, I shouldn’t have been trusted with this in the first place. You know the gods cursed me with the self-control of an imp.”

I laugh, unable to keep my amusement from showing. “Fair enough.” I turn back to the box, my laughter dying, and swallow hard. “Well, your knack for opening things without people knowing has certainly improved. I’ll give you that.”

“It’s not a knack, it’s a curse. But, yes, I am rather good at opening things without people knowing.” She flicks her lilac

eyes to Mera, her curly white-blond hair curtaining the side of her face. “By the way, your pay arrived this morning. You’re ten coins short.”

“Curse that cheap fucker!” Mera grumbles while Kris strides into the room.

Although she’s only four years younger than me, Kris has always had boundless amounts of energy and a child-like heart I’ve tried my best to let her hold on to for as long as possible. Her zest for life, even in the face of such hardship, is rare to come by these days. She’d probably call that a curse, too, but I think it’s a blessing.

“Do you think it’s your mating gown?” Kris peers over my shoulder down at the box. “It’s very beautiful. The fabric alone cost more than everything in my room. Maybe even more than everything in the house.”

I flinch as though struck by her words. I completely forgot about the whole mating gown thing. The entire ceremony, actually. I guess I succeeded in banishing it from invading my mind, but now it’s here again, and it’s staring me right in the face like a dark cloud that’s loomed over me all these years. As if sensing my unease, Mera takes a deep breath.

“Hey, is that rabbit stew I smell burning downstairs?”

“*Burning?!*” Krissie lets out a choking sound and makes quickly for the door. “Oh, my sweet little baby, I’m coming for you!”

She stomps into the hallway and clambers downstairs into the kitchen. Mera winks at me and I can’t keep the grin from sneaking onto my face. Poor Kris spent all day yesterday picking out the right herbs for her dish. Her hands were red-raw when she got home, frozen from the cold. Getting her new gloves was the main reason I followed Bane and his hunting party into the forest this morning.

That, and I wanted to prove to my future mate that No-Shifts *are* capable of hunting.

A fact I almost proved to him if he hadn’t gotten in the way.

“I’ll be downstairs if you need me,” Mera says.

I nod, unable to say anything. The door closes softly behind her. Only when I’m sure I’m alone do I hurry to the box and throw the lid aside, finally allowing my eyes to see what horror the alpha has in store for me. I frown as I drag the material out of the box.

It’s red.

Why is it red?

I drape the gown over my bed and fluff out the skirt. I’ve never seen something so beautiful and horrifying at the same time. Black lace covers the bodice, forming a corset at the back that bleeds down into a flock of ravens. They dance over the bottom of the skirt and up the sleeves, where leather hangs over the shoulders like black wings. A silk ribbon dangles from the neckline, tied together with a ruby that glares back at me.

The alpha might as well have used my own blood to make this dress.

Every inch of it screams luxury. The ruby alone could feed the whole orphanage if the alpha allowed it. But instead, he’d have me parade around with it on my neck while the children of his pack pick at scraps.

My hands trembling, I let the dress slip to the bed and grab the note. I break the seal with my fingertip and the alpha’s loopy handwriting makes me want to throw up before even reading what he has to say.



Verena,

*I have seen fit to bestow you with my generosity this evening
and invite you to attend a feast in honour of the gods. I will
send for you when the bell tolls at dusk.*

Do not disappoint me.

Your esteemed Alpha

BILE RISES into the back of my throat. I glance out my small bedroom window, the parchment clenched in my hand. Soft auburn clouds drift lazily toward the horizon without a care in the world for the suffering the world burns with. It won't be long before dusk settles and the bell tolls, my fate sealed at the same time.

My gaze lands on the box again. It can't be my mating gown. Those born in the Solarius pack all have white hair, so naturally that became their pack colour. I've attended several mating ceremonies in the past and they *always* wore white.

Surely the alpha wouldn't try to humiliate me further by desecrating a centuries-old tradition. I never pegged him for a foolish leader, simply a cruel one.

Besides, a mating ceremony involving his own son wouldn't be a private affair. The alpha would make it a grand one, an event spilling with such wasteful lavishes that all the other alphas attending would envy his wealth and power. Or so he'd like to think.

A true alpha would see only what food he deprived his people.

I shake my head and turn away from the window. No, it can't be tonight. Mera and Kris would've known about it. And the carts unloading at the courtyard would not have had enough time to set up. I scan the note again in search of any clues.

Do not disappoint me.

In other words, obey my command or suffer my wrath. Yet the thought of wearing something hideously expensive while so many of us are struggling sickens me to the core. I already

have no choice but to obey his command and mate with his son. I also have to wear whatever obnoxious dress he sends me for the ceremony. But judging by all the evidence, this is not that dress, so I will not be wearing it. The alpha will just need to be disappointed.

What's the worst he will do to me, anyway? Starve me for another week?

My body's gotten used to that.

Despite that the same cannot be said for his son, the alpha only punishes those deserving of it. He won't take his anger out on Kris, that I'm sure of, and he's not stupid enough to take it out on Mera. At least he hasn't so far. I guess I'll find out tonight.

Because I've had enough.

CHAPTER
TWO



Kris stares at me with large, unblinking eyes when I enter the kitchen. Her mouth hangs open and then shuts again several times before she gets any words out. Meanwhile, Mera just stares at me from across the table, a curious smile on her face and a steaming cup of liquorice tea hooked through her fingers.

“That dress looks remarkably different from the one I saw,” Kris says at last, finally managing to unlock her jaw and find her voice. “Very different.”

I grab a cookie from the table and hop up onto the counter beside her. The dirty rag hanging off my body reaches just below my knees. “That’s because it is,” I say, taking a bite of the cookie. Crumbs fall down my chest onto my lap. I brush them away while taking another mouthful of the stale but delicious baked good. “I decided to go with something a little different. Do you like it?” I flick more crumbs off my knee, much to Kris’s horror. “I think all the dirt really helps to bring out my unwashed complexion. I think this stain used to be blood. Or maybe it was urine. Who knows?”

For a moment, Kris doesn’t say anything. She merely watches in horror as I point to the various stains covering the rag that once clothed my small, weak, badly malnourished ten-year-old body.

“I... Well, it’s... it’s...” Her cheeks flush as she tries desperately hard to think of something positive to say. But there isn’t anything nice about the rags I spent the first decade of my life wearing. Kris throws her hands up. “I’m sorry but

it's just hideous! Must you wear it? The other dress really is quite beautiful, and it's custom made, Verena. *Custom. Made.*"

"And so is this one. I made it myself. I think it used to be a potato sack."

"A potato sa—" Kris chokes on the words. "Oh, come on. We're poor but we're not *that* poor." She turns to Mera with big eyes. "Are we?"

"No. But if Ver wants to wear it, then there's nothing we can do to stop her." Mera's gaze lands on me, and there's a hint of concern flashing in her eyes. "I hope you know what you're doing. The alpha won't be pleased."

"The alpha is never pleased," I mutter, and both of them nod. A silence follows. It's echoed by the songbirds chirping in the trees outside at the bottom of the hill. Wiping my mouth, I turn to Kris. "I want you to have the dress. You're about my size now anyway, and it's better you wear it—"

"—than you burn it?" Mera cuts in, her brows raised. "Gods above, you're too much like me."

I hop down from the table and grin at her. "Compliment taken."

"So... back to the dress..." Kris's eyes widen, so much more youthful than my own. "You're really letting me have it?"

"Really. And it's not like you didn't already try it on."

She glances at the floor, her cheeks blushing again. "Of — of course, I didn't. It wasn't my dress to try on."

"Uh-huh. Sure."

"Hey, I didn't!"

I throw my hands up in mock supplication. "All right. I believe ya, sis."

Krissie whacks me on the arm, then her eyes light up again as she casts a longing glance at the ceiling. Mera sips at her tea, either blissfully drowning us out or enjoying our banter, while I bring my lips to Krissie's ear.

“You just can’t help yourself, can you? You’re dying to try it on again.”

She breathes a desperate sigh. “Yes. I’ve just never seen something so beautiful. I felt like a goddess when I tried it on. Like a Blood Moon Goddess.”

“Full moon or half-moon?” I ask. An innocent question, really, but Krissie’s expression looks like my words just slapped her over the face.

“Full Moon, of course!” She stares between us both as if I should’ve known her answer was the only logical one. “Everyone knows the Half-Moon Goddess has a vicious temper. That’s why in some of the realms she’s known as the Mad Goddess. I never want to visit the packs that worship her and hold tournaments in her honour.”

“Well...” I drape an arm over Kris’s shoulders. “I would be mad, too, if I were only half full,” I say, waiting for a reaction with a stupid big grin on my face. But they give me nothing. Not even a snicker. “Oh, come on. That was hilarious. Laugh, damn you!”

“*You’re* hilarious.” Kris bumps her hip against mine. “Even more hilarious is that hideous rag you insist on wearing.”

I pull her in to playfully mess with her hair but the tolling of a bell stops me.

It stops everything, even the birds chirping in the trees.

Until a knock rattles the front door and Kris lets out a surprised gasp. Dusk has now fallen. She pulls away from me and casts me a nervous glance. It’s copied by Mera, now standing behind her. Both of them look as nervous as I feel inside, and I can count on one hand how many times I’ve seen Mera like this. One was the day the alpha announced I would mate with his son.

“You’re sure about this?” Mera asks me, gesturing to my outfit.

Even if I wasn’t, it’s already too late. The bell has tolled and now it’s time to feast with the alpha.

I swallow my nerves and give a shaky nod. “Yeah. I want to look him in the eye and remind him—remind all of them—of how he treats us.” Turning to Kris, I say, “Let them in.”

She nods and tiptoes over. However, she barely reaches the door when it thrusts open and Bane marches inside. His eyes land on me and me alone. At the sight of my outfit, his thin lips press into a hideous snarl, and all sense of bravado seems to vanish from me at that very moment. But then I see Kris pushed away into the corner, her terrified eyes following Bane’s every movement, and I lift my head high to look my future mate in the eye.

I will not let him, or his father, see me afraid again.

Especially not in front of my family.

Bane pauses beside me and gives me a quick, scathing once over. “My, my. How disappointed Father will be when he sees you spat upon his generosity.” Digging his fingers into my arm, Bane drags me to the door. “Let’s not keep him waiting now.”

I cast a glance over my shoulder before the door slams over behind me. Tears stream down Krissie’s face as she watches me be torn away. It’s the same reaction every time Bane comes for me, and every time I return, sometimes with hidden bruises, I promise to always protect her from them.

I promise that no one will tear our family apart—not even the gods.

“It’s okay,” I whisper, hoping she’s able to read my lips. “We’re going to be okay.”

After all, it’s not like I’m committing a crime by not wearing the dress.

I’m merely teaching a bad wolf a lesson.



THE ROTUNDA STANDS at the centre of the pack, the one building not falling apart.

Once thought to be the heart of a fae god, the crystal dome at the top of the building now towers over the rest of us like a blood-sucking demon. It was supposed to be a place of refuge—a temple to venerate the gods and keep evil spirits away. The irony is that the only evil spirit the crystals haven't kept away is the alpha who dines within its halls each night.

Bane releases me outside the silver gates. Small crystals dangle on a chain around each of the spikes. While a guard opens the way, I allow myself a moment to take everything in. I've never been this close to the rotunda, and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't the least bit excited to see what's inside.

I never understood why the alpha allowed Mera to take me in. A bunch of us were bought from our human masters, but Mera saved me from becoming a slave to the pack like the alpha wanted us to be. She saw something in me, and to this day, I still don't know what it was.

Fire, maybe, like the one she says burns in my chest with the strength of a goddess.

I shield my gaze against the dying rays of sunlight reflecting off the dome, and my breath catches in my throat. During the day, the dome looks like any other crystal of its kind. But at dusk when they come alive, as they are now, each brightly lit shard ripples like moonlight against water. It's breathtaking to behold despite the cruelty housed within.

Bane leads the way through the gates and into a stone corridor. The sconces illuminating the porticos flicker as we pass by them. At the end of the corridor stretches two enormous double doors. Bane kicks them open, his disrespect for the building and the gods evident as always, then drags me inside.

Bright yellow light bleeds into my eyes. I blink my way through it and into a grand hall laden with riches beyond measure. And food—so much food—laid out on a table the length of my home. The alpha sits at the end of the table, already feasting. Food drips down in his neatly cut grey beard, the same colour as his long, braided hair.

The alpha looks much older than he is, but he still has the beauty of an alpha. It's wasted on him and his son. He doesn't stop eating when we arrive. He doesn't even look up from his plate. He just continues eating as if I'm not there. Until he catches what I'm wearing out of the corner of his eye, and he pauses. It's a slight pause, barely perceptible, but it makes me tremble.

I'd also be lying if I said I wasn't afraid of this alpha.

The very sight of him threatens to strip me of every ounce of bravado I mustered before arriving here. But I vowed to never let him, or his son, see me afraid again. Yet here I am, already on the verge of breaking that vow. I need to pull myself together.

It's with this in mind that I lift my head to meet the alpha's gaze. He may sense my fear, perhaps even smell it, but I will not let him see it on my face. Fear just makes his cruelty all the more satisfying to him.

He resumes eating once I'm brought to his side. His son sneers beside me, his arms crossed smugly over his chest. But then his father speaks—and that smile melts away from him.

“Leave.”

Bane gawks, first at me, then at his father. “But you said I could—”

“I said...leave.”

His son lingers for a second more before he storms out of the room. The doors slam behind him. While the alpha scoffs and continues eating, I quickly scan the rest of the table. Two plates. Two wine glasses. Two sets of cutlery. Yet the amount of food could feed the whole pack...

“Sit.”

The alpha's deep voice echoing again startles me. I peel my gaze away from the table. His light blue eyes fix on me, the colour so much like the shards of ice penetrating his heart. They freeze me to the spot like they always do, as a cruel smile twists its way over his lips.

“Are you incapable of sitting?” The smile vanishes, and his dark blue eyes narrow into slits. “Incapable of following orders?”

I swallow down my nerves and shake my head. “No, Alpha.”

“Then why do you linger, and why are you wearing”—he gestures to my outfit—“that?”

He watches me pull out and sit on the only chair beside him. His citrusy scent invades my nostrils, threatening to make me gag. I wet my lips and focus on the response I rehearsed earlier. Drawing attention to his role as alpha is the only tool I have to use.

“As the future alpha’s mate, I’m expected to help grow his pack and implement change when change is needed.” I glance at him, daring to meet his gaze for a flicker of a moment, before diverting my attention back to the empty plate before me. “I thought that—”

The alpha shoots up from his seat and the sound of his chair rattling the floor silences me. In two impossibly swift moves, he pulls me from my own seat and grabs my face between his fingers, forcing me to not only meet his gaze but hold it to witness the molten rage burning in his eyes. The muscles in his jaw thrash as he clenches his teeth before opening his wine-stained lips to release the poison I know will follow.

“That’s your problem, Omega. For such a pretty little face, you rarely *think*.” He digs his fingers into my cheeks and tilts my head back farther, stretching out my neck, the vein in my throat pulsing. He watches it flutter under his duress before looking at me. “Shall I remind you of your expectations?”

His fingers moving over my windpipe, I instinctively draw my own hand over his to fight for release. But my clawing only makes him sneer.

“You are an Omega, born for knotting and pleasure only. You are expected to follow your alpha’s commands. You are expected to please him when he wishes to be pleased, to obey

him when he must be obeyed, and to never... disappoint him.” His grip tightens with those two last words, threatening to cut off my air supply. “I am the alpha of this pack. My son only thinks he will succeed me because that is what I have allowed him to think. But I have no intention of letting him become alpha.”

As if suddenly scorched by my skin, the alpha releases me and pulls back. I fall into my chair, my legs threatening to collapse underneath me. Alferis returns to his seat and takes a sip from his wine as though he hadn't just choked me while dropping the mother of all bombshells.

He has no intention of letting his son be alpha?

I watch him right his chair and then settle again. Grabbing the bottle of wine from the table, he refills his glass, his head cocked to the side. Several moments pass before he speaks again. All the while, I watch him with silent fury, ingraining his features into the depths of my mind so I never forget his face. Never forget what he did to me.

“Do you know why food is scarce in these lands?”

The question snaps me back to reality. I stare at the table laden with sickening amounts of food, most of which the pack will receive only the scraps. Is his question some sort of trick? The answer is obvious: food is scarce in these lands because he over hunts it. The majority of our sustenance comes from packs we hold an alliance with, and from what Mera told me, those alliances have been dwindling since Alferis took over. We're barely scraping by because of *his greed*.

“The prey have moved on,” I answer instead, knowing my response makes me sound stupid even though I know the truth.

He scoffs. “Yes, but *why* have they moved on?”

I frown at him. It's like he wants me to tell the truth. However, I refuse to take the bait. That's what he wants me to do.

“Because it's cold?”

My snarky response pulls a slightly louder scoff from him. Better than a reprimand.

“It was once said the gods curse a pack when they know they are weak and not serving their alpha the way that they should,” he says, his eyes never leaving me. “While everyone groans about the food, they are not looking after me. Their alpha. The prey will return once everyone treats me as they should.”

He licks the wine from his lips, his gaze never leaving me. “You see, one must be willing to be cruel in this world to be powerful. But cruelty is a delicate thing. Give too much of it, and you eradicate packs from existence. Give too little, and you become the eradicated pack.” He takes a drink, and it looks like blood on his lips when he pulls the glass away. “If I let my son take over the pack, there would be nothing left of it, only ash on the wind and blood on the snow. My son is too wasteful to be the next alpha. Too...”

“Cruel?” I say much to the alpha’s surprise.

“Precisely.”

“Is that why you...” I pick up my own glass of wine, clenching the stem to hide my shaking, and take a nervous sip. It’s with effort I force myself not to wince from the sharp, vinegary taste. “Is that why you bound me to him? To produce for you a second choice of heir?”

A small, barely perceptible nod, followed by a minute twitch of the lip. My heart sinks to the pit of my stomach. Now I understand why Bane hates me so much. It’s not because I don’t belong in his pack. It’s because I was the pawn his father needed to take that pack away from him. His very birthright. I’ve practically been spitting into Bane’s face without even knowing it every single time I’ve ever looked at him. But now I know. The alpha hasn’t just sentenced me to a life of misery with his son.

He’s sentenced me to death.

Because who’s to say Bane won’t kill me once I’ve given his father what he wants?

Who’s to say he won’t kill my children just to secure his place as the only remaining alpha of the pack? It’s been done

before and by wolves who were less cruel than Bane. I was willing to go through with this to protect my family, but I never imagined my children would suffer the same fate as me. The same treatment. Although alphas are notoriously protective of their young, especially the heir to the pack, Bane now has every reason to despise our children as much as he despises me. He'd hurt them just to get his revenge on his father.

My son might be spared—if Alferis chooses to protect him as the next alpha—but as for any others... I can't put them through that. I'd rather kill myself than let this happen. Even then it probably wouldn't matter. Alferis would just take his anger out on those I leave behind.

In the corner of my eye, he watches me reach for the wine glass and bring it to my lips. I try to appear calm when I take a small sip, but my lower lip trembles against the rim, giving away my fear, while images of my future children, scared and beaten, and of Kris and Mera, dead on the kitchen floor, play through my mind. I drop the glass and it shatters on the tabletop, spilling wine everywhere. The blood-red liquid seeps through the white cloth until it trickles over the edge onto my thighs. Yet I don't move. I can barely breathe. It's like the alpha has crushed my lungs with his bare hands.

"I can't... do this," I manage to gasp out.

Meanwhile, Alferis sets down his napkin with an exaggerated sigh. "Such waste. I had that wine sent from Rigel especially for tonight."

"I said I can't do this!"

I can't breathe. I can't breathe!

But the alpha merely walks to my side, his focus on the wine pooling wastefully over the table. I want to run away from him, to run from the building, but my entire body just freezes. Alferis reaches for my own napkin, untouched before me, and slowly, carefully, unfolds it. He then presses the napkin to my skin, the soft material like razors when it touches me.

“I know what fear races through that mind of yours, Omega.” His deep voice carries to me quietly, tenderly almost. “My son is not yet foolish enough to kill my chosen heir. But he may grow to be. Resentment is a powerful motivator and that is why I have decided to offer you the most precious gift above all.” He pauses, his pupils dilating into black orbs. “The gift of choice.”

“You’re letting me choose?” I crane my neck to frown up at him, completely forgetting about the hand on my thigh creeping higher. And then it hits me like ice twisting through my gut. “*You?*”

The word leaves me as a whisper, dumbfounded and fear ridden. I pull my gaze away from him and frown down at the table. “I don’t... understand.”

His hand works its way underneath my rags but I’m too frozen to pull away. “It is not for you to understand, Omega, but to obey.” Cold fingers crawl to the space between my legs. “You are unique to me. Give me an heir worthy to be alpha and the gods will bestow upon me their forgiveness and cease this famine once and for all. But you must give yourself to me willingly. That they have made perfectly clear this time.”

Barely restrained tears blur my vision as I stare down at the table at all the wasted food. Alferis already has the means to end this famine. He simply chooses not to. He’d rather keep his pack under control by living in constant fear of him. But what he doesn’t yet know is that fear is also a powerful motivator. Give too much of it, and that fear turns into anger. Anger is what makes a pack rise against its alpha in the end.

I grab his hand, stopping him from going any farther. “You’re lying.”

His eyes cut through me like shards of ice. “I am what?”

His sharp tone would normally make me cower but for once it only angers me.

“You are a *liar*,” I hiss out. “The gods aren’t punishing us because your wolves don’t love you enough or that your son isn’t worthy to be alpha.” I muster all my strength to shove his

hand aside and then I push away from the table. “They’re punishing us because of *your* greed. Your cruelty!”

A cold sneer upturns the edge of his lips. “Then tell me, Omega. How does an alpha atone for being too cruel?” When I don’t immediately answer him, he chuckles. “Nothing? Then allow me to enlighten you once again. An alpha may only receive the gods’ forgiveness if the sacrifice they offer to them is great enough. So, if you will not embrace the sacrifice I was willing to offer them so generously with you, then you leave me with no other choice.” He snaps his fingers and the doors to the hall open wide. “I will offer them a different sacrifice. One I had prepared in the event you chose unwisely to disappoint me yet again.”

Korven marches over, flanked by two guards. A thick heavy chain trails from his hand, scraping the ground behind him with each step. I instinctively back away but the alpha catches me and then he shoves me into them. They all laugh as Korven catches me. He pins me against his chest while the guards bind me in the chains. The moment they touch my body, they burn through my skin, and tears of rage fill my eyes when I realise bitterly they wouldn’t have done that if only I wore that stupid dress.

“Is everything in order, Korven?”

“Yes, Alpha.”

“Then let the sacrifice begin.”

Alferis returns to his chair and watches his men drag me away. His lack of sneer just makes me more terrified about what’s to come.

“What sacrifice?” I pull at the chains searing through my skin and try to look back at him. “*What sacrifice?!*”

He picks up his wine glass and gives a cold, dismissive shrug. “If you do not bend to my will, Verena, I will make you bend to the gods.” Then he looks at me as I’m dragged away, his eyes lit up with sadistic glee. “Kris will be our Offering this night.”

CHAPTER
THREE



The chains slither over my body like a serpent, squeezing the life out of me whenever I try to break free. Its grip only tightens when I move and tears through my rag, burning my skin with some kind of poison. I grit my teeth to keep from screaming out for the alpha who watches me closely. Pleasure gleams in his twisted eyes. The chains must be enchanted with the same magical poison used on the collars to bind the human slaves he keeps here for entertainment. I really wish I wore that stupid red dress if just to help protect me a little from the poison.

I went too far, defying him like that. But it's not me who's going to pay for it.

It's Kris.

She's barely sixteen!

Sickness rises in my throat as I shout my protests to make anyone listen to me. They don't. My pleas echo around the dome like whispers falling on a dead wind. Korven and his men continue wrapping the chains around my arms, waist, and chest until I can't move an inch from my position on my knees. One of them pushes hard on my shoulders to keep me down. I'm weak without my wolf, and I've never felt as helpless as I do right now.

Alferis looks down at me from the table. Just one look, and there's nothing but annoyance in his gaze. Annoyance? Rage sears through me, overriding the pain. He's going to kill my friend, someone I consider a sister in everything but blood,

and he's *annoyed* with me? I knew Alferis was selfish and cruel, but I never thought he was this cruel. This... evil. Alphas are meant to lead and inspire, and sometimes make hard decisions in order to protect the pack.

But this isn't a hard decision. It's easy. It's personal.

"Shut her up! I'd like to eat in peace before the ceremony."

Korven snaps his fingers once, and a gag is pushed into my mouth. Rough hands grip my cheeks and clamp my jaw. Alferis returns his meal. *Bastard!* I curse him over and over through the gag. His betas keep pinning me down and watch me sharply as if I can escape from this somehow. As if I can stop the alpha from killing my sister. But I can't.

Kris is going to die tonight as a sacrifice to the gods.

And there's nothing I can do to save her.

I'm too weak to stop this madness. I can't shift, and I've never once wished I could connect to my inner wolf more than I do now, so I can rip this alpha apart and save my friend. My sister.

Time passes so slowly while Alferis eats the rest of his meal. He takes a bite from each item of food and drinks nearly the whole bottle of wine before finally rising. He doesn't even look at me when he throws his napkin on the table and turns to his men.

"Feed the rest to my dogs and be quick about it."

Disgust twists my stomach as three servants rush in to clear the table.

"*Dogs?*" My voice is muffled but I know he can hear me.

"And make sure they eat every scrap," he adds, looking right at me.

I glare back at him, wishing I could scream a million things at him. What about the children starving in the streets just outside your door? What about the men and women who work all day for you and still don't have enough food to feed their families?

What about your pack?

He walks around me slowly and then nods to his betas. Korven grabs my upper arm and drags me along with them. I barely feel the pain of their grip over the ringing in my ears and my heart racing in my chest.

Kris. I need to warn Kris.

Alferis's servants open the main doors as we approach, and a bright light bleeds into my eyes. All around the pack border, an enormous fire gorges, the white flames burning like the star gods they're intended for. My gut clenches as I breathe in the smoky air. As soon as darkness has fallen, The Offering dies for all the gods to see. The moon has already clawed its way into the sky, glowing a brilliant shade of red—perfect for a sacrifice.

In the years I've been here, there have been at least a dozen sacrifices but I have never attended one. I've always found them to be a horrible and pointless way to die since the Star Gods have never cared if a mortal or shifter dies for them. They'd kill us all in a blink if our own gods didn't exist to prevent them.

Those chosen as the sacrifice are normally someone old or already dying from an illness. I hope the pack, for once, fights this and puts an end to the barbarism once and for all. But the chances of them standing up to their alpha is very slim, which I'm painfully aware of.

Usually only another alpha can do that, and since we're out in the middle of nowhere and most of the other packs avoid our alpha, those chances are even slimmer. None of the other packs ever visit here. I've watched Bane lose his temper more than once when his invitations are rejected. Maybe they know how barbaric it is here. To them, sacrificing one of their own is lunacy. But to most of the Solarius pack, it's just a way of life here. Cruelty breeds cruelty, after all. They've never known anything different.

No, this can't be happening! It can't be real!

I scream around the gag and try to bite my way through it, but it's too tight. Bane steps out of the shadows behind the gates, and for a moment, his eyes meet mine. Something flickers in them that I've never seen before. Remorse, maybe. Pity, definitely. Despite everything he's put me through, I try to beg him with my eyes to put an end to this madness. But he doesn't move. He just stands there as the bell tolls behind me and the rest of the pack gathers at the rotunda.

Panic flares through me again and wraps around my throat like the chains searing my skin. That same panic is scorched with hatred. Hatred for him, for his father, for the gods they're making this sacrifice to. I throw myself around the betas to claw at Bane's face, but the wolves drag me backward even as I kick and scream at them. Some of those already gathered outside the building stare at me as if I've lost my mind, and in a way, I have.

I scream at them, *they're going to kill Kris*, but my muffled sounds fall on deaf ears. Even Torenn, who was always relatively nice to me, doesn't do anything. He can't even bring himself to look at me. He knew. That's why he gave me that look earlier. He knew what the alpha was planning on doing. I stare dumbfounded at the rest of the pack. Did everyone know? My stomach clenches. Did Mera? I shake my head in disbelief. No. Mera would not have allowed this. And yet, as I look around at all the faces gathered to watch the sacrifice, I don't see her...

The rotunda doors open again, its shadow crawling over me until it swallows up my own. My blood runs cold when the alpha's scent snakes over me. I'm forced to turn and watch as he makes his grand entrance. He wears the same suit as before, but a red cloak has been draped over his shoulders and it trails behind him on the floor like a pool of blood.

He pauses at the top of the steps and spreads his arms out like a god commanding his people. But his people look up at him, not with love and adoration, but fear. The kind that eats away at you every day until it wears you down to the bone and only bitter acquiescence remains.

The alpha's voice booms over everyone. "The mighty Star and Moon Gods have spoken to me this evening. They have demanded one of you be sacrificed under this red moon. Since a Blood Moon only appears once every one hundred years, I have chosen a particularly special offering, one I hope the gods see fit to bless us in return with bountiful prey and keep the vicious fae from our door for many years to come."

Hushed whispers circulate around the pack as they realise I'm not the sacrifice. Many of them stare at me with a mix of curiosity and disgust. Not one pair of eyes I meet looks at me with sympathy. Some of them are fearful, yes, but never sympathetic. Alferis makes a point of looking at me before addressing the crowd again.

"The Omega is here to learn obedience. Anyone who dares help her will suffer my wrath." He descends the steps slowly. "Now follow your alpha. The gods are waiting."

No. No. No. This can't be happening. This can't be real.

Alferis walks ahead, ignoring me and looking carefree, almost gleeful as the sun sets so much faster than I want it to. The sky is filled with bright oranges that cast shadows across the ground as I'm dragged behind him. Bane walks at his side, his hands behind his back. He doesn't once lift his head. Coward. I hate that I was born to be mated to an alpha's son like him, just because of my blood. If Kris dies, it will destroy me. Any fight, any protest I'll ever have will die with her if I can't stop this offering.

I have to stop it.

I desperately search the crowds as I'm dragged through the streets to the altar. Mud and stones rip at my knees but I barely register the pain. I look for the only person who can possibly help—Mera. But I don't see her. All I do see is the rest of this horrid pack that has hated me from the moment I was brought here.

Rain begins to pour from the darkening skies, the droplets so cold, they're like ice when they hit my skin. Soon my hair clings to my face like a wet veil and my rags are soaked to my

bones, shreds of them hanging off from where the chains seared my flesh.

Drums beat in the distance. Korven and the alpha's other betas drag me to the middle of the pack village, a place I've always avoided except for the market. Three massively long chimes made of pure white crystal dangle from the bell tower. It's the oldest structure in the pack, nearly as big as the rotunda itself, and right at the top is an enormous bell bathed in century-old blood.

One ring for the alpha. Two rings for The Offering. Three for fae.

I've only ever heard the bell ring once, or twice like it's doing right now over and over. Underneath the crystal chimes rests a circle platform with deep runes carved into the stone. Every time The Offering is killed, those groves are filled with blood until they form the symbol of two moons—one half and one full, and a dozen stars around them. I'm thrown before the platform. Korven laughs as I land in a puddle that spits mud all over my burns. I hiss through my pain and focus my watery glare on the sacrificial altar towering over me.

The gods who decide our fate. Did you decide it was time for Kris to die? Did you decide to punish us both? Or is this just one alpha's madness?

Alferis looms over me, a sneer twisting over his face. Bane stands motionless by the platform, his face unusually blank as he watches his father bend just enough to tilt my face and whisper in my ear. "There is still time, Omega. Bow yes to our previous discussion and I will put an end to this. I will choose someone else and allow you to take your sweet, innocent friend back home. Obey me, bend to my will before the gods, and it will all be over."

Hot tears stream down my cheeks, hotter than the chains around me. I can't let Kris die. I can't! I'll do whatever it takes to spare her from this even if it destroys me in the process.

Unable to hold my sobs back any longer, I bow my head, nodding once.

The alpha only laughs. “Very good. That is how an Omega should be—bowing at an alpha’s feet. Now let this serve as a reminder.” He straightens and wipes his hands on his robe, the dirt from my face smearing the fabric. “And that alphas do not make deals with the likes of *you*.”

I scream through my gag as he turns and walks away from me.

The drums beat louder with every passing second, and stars fill the night sky, the very sight of them like glass stabbing me in the heart. No one listens. No one cares. No one even looks at me. Their eyes are fixed on the altar, and I sob even harder when I realise why.

Kris.

Another beta drags Kris, kicking and crying, to the altar. Her white hair has been pulled into a low bun and red flowers pin the strands in place. But several loose ones hang wildly around her face from her struggles, and the hem of her white dress, glittering like diamonds, is covered in mud and leaves. Her terrified eyes find mine and I only see how young she looks, how small, standing underneath those gigantic crystal chimes.

With a nod from the alpha, she’s thrown onto the platform. The crowd erupts into applause. They’re all cheering for this as if they can’t wait for Kris to die so the gods can fulfil a promise they didn’t even make. They’re all brainwashed. I search their faces, helplessly looking for Mera, but I don’t see her. I don’t see anyone willing to help or show us mercy.

“P-please don’t do this,” Kris sobs, her desperate pleas shattering me as she turns to the alpha. “I – I thought I was allowed to – to pick those herbs. I’m s-s-so sorry. I won’t do it again. Please don’t ki-kill me. Please!”

Tears stream down my cheeks. I can’t see anything other than the scared little girl Mera brought home one night. Mera used to work odd jobs for Kris’s family, who were close friends with the alpha and well-off in the pack. But something happened between Alferis and Kris’s mother, which led to both her parents being killed in a *tragic accident*.

No one really knows what happened to Kris's parents. Mera said the alpha had taken a liking to her mother, but since she was only interested in her mate the alpha killed the two of them. After tonight, after his "offer", I have no doubt the rumours are true—Alferis killed them because his fragile alpha was humiliated by her mother's rejection.

He threw Kris out onto the streets for her parents' "disgrace." She was only six. She would've become a servant if she was lucky—a slave in a whorehouse, if she wasn't—but Mera couldn't let that happen. She took Kris in despite the alpha's orders, and it was all a shock for Kris to begin with since she was used to servants doing everything for her.

But Kris welcomed us with open arms and never once cried for her past life. She cried for her parents, more than once actually, but never for the riches she had. Mera taught us that happiness can't be found in wealth, only in love, and love can never be bought.

Kris has always been so brave. So, so brave, and yet they're going to kill her.

Once again, I thrash under Korven's weight pinning me to the ground. I kick and scream at him while crying out for someone—anyone—to show mercy. But no one listens. Still I keep on shouting. I scream and beg for our places to be switched.

Take me! Kill me!

Alferis claps his hands once, and the crowd falls silent. The drums fade away along with the bell until there's nothing but the wind howling through the trees and Kris's sobbing.

I don't take my gaze off her, forcing myself to look her in the eye. Kris is going to die tonight because of me. I'm the one who did this to her. It's all my fault.

Alferis nods and the gag is ripped from my mouth. Once more kneeling beside me, the alpha grabs my chin. I try to snap at him, tear through his flesh like a rabid beast, but he grabs my chin and holds my jaw shut with his claws. "You will watch and learn, Omega." His voice echoes around the

pack for everyone to hear as he points at Kris, never taking his eyes off me.

It's not just a lesson for me now but to anyone else who refuses to bow at his feet. "This is The Offering." He uses his other hand to point at Kris, his gaze never moving from me. "It is a great honour to be chosen, but if you make a sound her death will be long and painful. You must watch and learn silence." Bringing his disgusting lips to my ear, he snarls for only me to hear: "You were born to fuck alphas, not disobey them. This is your fault. Her blood... is on your hands. Now watch it run."

I want to scream even more, but his warning echoes through in my mind. He's going to kill a child to protect himself and teach me a lesson. To him, Kris is nothing because to me she's everything. She's the family I've always wanted.

None of this is a lesson. It's revenge.

Alferis slowly pulls out a gold dagger from his hip, the blade smothered in diamonds. That dagger could be sold to buy food for the pack for months. The crowd remains quiet, and it's almost like it's just Kris and me. Her wide, bloodshot eyes search my own pleadingly, begging me to help her. But I can't.

I can't!

Bane forces her once more to her knees. I glare at him for a moment before turning back to Kris. She mouths something to me about helping her or running away. Both of which I am unable to do. Alferis walks up to her, and she cries, begs, wails for him to still show mercy. He moves behind her and roughly grabs her hair. Snapping her head back, he lifts the dagger to her throat, and I know he's looking at me, but I can't tear my eyes away from Kris. She tries to fight him. She tries to twist and break free from his grasp, but she's so weak and tiny, so helpless against him.

Alferis draws the blade across her throat, and blood pours from her. It runs swiftly down her dress, legs, and onto the altar. He then throws her against the platform, leaving her

there to bleed out as though she was nothing, merely a bit of meat for the gods to feast upon.

A wailing noise shrieks around me, and numbly I realise it's me as Kris takes her final breath, her eyes never leaving my own. The light and laughter I always found in them fade from her like the last rays of sunlight dying over the horizon. Her death is so swift, so heartless, so cruel, and just like that... Kris is gone.

My wailing turns into a deafening scream that shatters everything around me. Waves of uncontrollable power blast off my body. It explodes everything within reach, including the chains imprisoning me. What remains of them slam to my feet next to Korven's unmoving body.

My scream still slices through the air even when I shut my mouth and look up at the three ancient chimes dangling from the bells shattering into a million pieces. Just before they land on Alferis, he jumps to the side, and there's a flicker of the same fear in his eyes Kris had moments before he killed her.

His fear is the only thing that holds me together.

I shield my face from the crystal shards shooting through the air. Only when everything is silent, and my screams have faded, do I stand. My throat burns and my whole body trembles from whatever strange power had coursed through me. I glance at the ground. A circle of glowing white crystals sprouts around me, clawing out from the earth itself.

What in the stars was that power and how do I do it again?

When I lift my gaze from the strange crystals, everyone is staring at me. For once their eyes aren't filled with disgust or hatred for me. They're filled with fear. Good. They let this happen. Grief threatens to swallow me when I look at all the crystals piled on the altar. Kris's blood pools down the edges of the platform, dragged away with the heavy rain.

Kris... is gone. I couldn't save her.

I cover my lips, a sob wrenching its way from my throat. *I let her die.*

“Get her!” Alferis roars as two massive wolves lunge toward me. “She has severed our protection. Do not let her escape!”

I roll out of the way before they land on me. Dragging myself to my feet, I quickly make my retreat. Chaos follows me. Wolves snap at my heels. I dodge my way through them, but suddenly they stop chasing me, and suddenly nothing else matters.

What remains of the bell tolls three times in the distance.

Three times. That means...

The fae are here.

CHAPTER
FOUR



Chaos doesn't just follow me. It consumes everything in its path.

And yet even as the bell tolls three times, I don't move. My bare feet root to the spot as if frozen to the ground. Everyone else realises what it means within moments, and they run in all different directions. Some run to get out of the pack and others are rushing to their homes to save their families. No one comes for me. I'm alone, feeling like I'm dying as I wrap my arms around my waist, blocking out the world.

I stand in the middle of the chaos, staring at the broken crystals as wolves run past them, seeing her blood dripping down the steps. Drip, drip, drip. All I see is blood, and the bells ringing are nothing more than an echo as I shake from head to toe. A white wolf slams hard into my shoulder, knocking me over, a child rolling off his back. The child looks at me with wide eyes filled with fear before she screams, climbing to her feet and running. The wolf growls at me before running after his child and I lie on the ground, looking up at the stars.

I can't pick myself up off the ground. I have nothing to fight for.

Bits of the chains I broke are littered around me and I pick one up, holding it in front of my face. Clear crystals are wrapped around it, digging into the metal. "How is this possible?"

A female scream echoes in the air, and it reminds me of Kris dying. It reminds me of someone else too.

Mera.

She can't know that Kris is dead, but for all I know, she might be at our home, alone, with the fae attacking. I won't let her die too. I can't lose another person. I just—can't. Climbing to my feet, I search for an opening in the crowd. When I see a gap between the cracked and ruined houses, I run. Narrowly missing an angry wolf, I jump out of the way and keep avoiding anybody in my path. Thankfully, everyone is so scared that they aren't looking at me as I run down the familiar streets and past the healing hut.

I skid to a stop at the end of an alleyway, only five minutes from my home. Right in front of me stands a white wolf with a dagger pierced through its heart, and holding onto that dagger is a tall, thick-shouldered man. Except, he's not a man at all.

He's fae.

My blood runs cold as I look at his pointed ears, almost glowing darkly tanned skin and the many, many weapons all over his dark green clothes. He slowly rips the dagger out of the wolf, who whines softly, making my guts clench. The fae kicks the dead wolf aside as though it wasn't a real person, and my heart leaps in my chest as the fae turns his attention to me. His eyes, glowing blue, find mine in the darkness.

I take a step back, and the fae grins, revealing canine teeth that are sharp enough to rip out my throat. The nursery rhyme was true.

Be careful of the fae, young wolf.

They come in the night with teeth so bright and sharp.

Be careful of the fae, young wolf.

They will rip you apart and devour your heart.

He looks straight at me, twisting the dagger in his hand. His accent is thick and strange. "You're pretty for a wolf. Shame you have to die before we can have any fun."

I keep walking backwards, preparing to run. I have to get to Mera. The fae stops mid-step, his eyes widening as his gaze travels over my shoulder. He nods once then turns and leaves me alone in the alleyway. The heat at my back tells me I'm not alone, though.

What, or rather, *who* did the fae nod to? I almost don't want to turn to find out, but his low chuckle forces me to, and my heart jumps the moment I meet his gaze.

“Mercy is a rare kindness of mine, but I watched The Offering and have decided it is yours.” He closes the small distance between us, his eyes glowing like the moment the moonlight breaks through the thick clouds on a stormy night. “This time only.”

His accent is just as strange but his voice is deeper. He takes another step, his lips twitching at the sides. I can't move. His very scent pins me to the ground, wrapping around me like a cool breeze whispering through the forest at night after it rains. It reminds me of the way raindrops settle on the ground to create that earthy smell I find so comforting on my morning hunts.

A fae should *not* smell comforting to me.

Especially not one so good-looking and who happens to be my enemy.

His intense stare never leaves my own even when he stops in front of me, his body so close his breath fans my cheeks. Intense is the only way I can describe him. Every inch of him is powerful, from his hair braided on one side that falls to his thick shoulders—the other side shaved and covered in black runes that trail down his neck—to his black leather armour that covers his muscular form. He towers over me at least by two feet.

I manage to take a step back away from him. His dark eyes follow my movement like a predator spotting its prey. That's all I am to him. Prey.

“I didn't ask for your mercy, *faeborn*.”

He smirks, amusement lining his eyes despite my tone of voice. His teeth shine in the moonlight, revealing sharp canines. He leans against the side of a house and crosses his arms.

“Don’t run, Mercy.”

My heart pounds so fast I don’t even know what I’m saying. “My name is not Mercy, and yeah, I am a wolf. So, of course, I’m going to run from your kind.”

The words barely leave me when I dart away from him. I’m not choosing to die. I’m choosing to get the fuck out of here while I still can. I run as fast as possible down the alleyways. My path soon leads me to a crowd of people under attack by the fae warriors cloaked in shadows. I push my way through, stepping over dead wolves and mauled fae as I go. Even among all the screaming, the fae’s laughter follows me like a haunted dream. I don’t know who he was or why he just saved my life, but a bad feeling settles in my stomach.

Why would he save my life? Fae don’t show mercy. They’re incapable of it. Everyone knows fae are nothing more than hedonistic monsters who think they’re superior to every other being. But that fae back there definitely saved my life. Why would he do that?

Enough. It doesn’t matter. I need to find Mera so we can get out of this pack. We’ll head west, to another one, and hope they’ll let us join them. Mera even has some friends in the north that might take us in. Surviving this attack and seeking refuge there is all that matters now.

I dart around the farmhouses located by the frozen, cropless fields. A loose barrel of hay has been left outside. I hide behind it and wait for my next opening. The sound of screams is so loud now that no wolf or fae is going to hear me in the straw. Moments pass before I’m able to slip out and I run over to the edge of the field, carefully peering out. Wolves are still running in every direction and the fae are chasing the men, but not the women and children, I notice, who are escaping into the forests. I frown, wondering why they aren’t

attacking them. None of this makes any sense. My power, the destruction of the crystals, the fae attacking...

Did my power let them in? Is this all my fault? I shake my head and look at my home. I see our rickety old building in the distance, and my heart leaps in my chest when I see a light on inside. Mera must not have known or heard The Offering bells. Or maybe she was locked inside the house when they took Kris away. Moon gods, I hope she's inside. If Mera is safe, I can breathe a little. I haven't lost everyone.

I run out of the field when it's quiet, only to come to a halt as four white wolves slither out from around the edges of my home. Blood drips out of the mouth of the middle, familiar wolf. Bane shifts back until he's standing fully naked in front of me, the rain still falling from the skies on us both. His voice is tipped with coldness. "You're coming with me, Omega."

Before, I would have gone with him without a fight, accepting my fate as his wife. But now? After Kris? I'd rather die. "No."

A growl rips out of his throat, sending shivers down my spine. "The pack's mine now. My father fled at the sight of the fae like the coward he is." His retreat doesn't surprise me. Alferis is a poor example of an alpha. When his life is in danger, he wouldn't face it and fight. He would run. "I will hunt him down and rebirth our pack. Together, we will make the Solarius pack powerful again. Now come with me."

I lift my head. "I'm not going anywhere with you. You let him kill her. Kris. She didn't deserve that, and you knew it, and yet you still let him kill an innocent child! You're just as much a coward as your father. You're a fucking monster, and I'm not going anywhere with you. Anyone that follows you is a fool."

He snarls at me. "I never said you had a choice. You're my Omega."

"Wrong," a deep voice growls. "I think you'll find the Omega belongs to no one but me. She's my mate."

We all turn to the dark forest as another man steps out into the light, his piercing blue eyes resting upon my own. He's massive compared to the other males around me. Everything about him exudes power, even the way he drags a hand through his thick wavy blond hair and flexes the muscles on his forearm. My body screams for me to run from him, but my feet remain rooted, unable to move or let me pull my gaze away.

Something within me stirs at the sight of this wolf.

Something I've never felt before.

"You're not welcome here, Alpha Elias," Bane snarls at him, naming the stranger. "Crawl back to your pack and take those Vaega mutts with you."

Alpha Elias? Of the Vaega pack? Why is he all the way down here? The Vaega pack is far in the north, the land so hard to reach that not many go there and return alive. I run my gaze over his shirtless body, at all the fresh blood sprayed over his firm chest. Not one inch of him is soft, and he's covered in small scars. That doesn't surprise me, but the way my body reacts does. I'm feeling a mixture of wanting to run away and wanting to run to him.

He tilts his head to the side, ignoring Bane. Even with his focus on me, I get the sense that he's watching Bane and the other wolves from the corner of his eyes in case they attack. Three more wolves come out of the shadows behind him, and I sense many more in the forest, only catching flashes of their eyes reflecting the moonlight. Each of the white wolves are giant, and much bigger than Bane. Moon above, how big is their alpha then? His eyes never leave me.

"I'm Elias, alpha of the Vaega pack, and you're my mate. You're safe now."

I shake my head in disbelief. "No, you must be mistaken."

Bane's own disbelief shows as a frown on his face. "Definitely mistaken. This female is to be *my* mate."

His lips curl up in disgust at Bane's comment. "*This female* isn't going to be anything but a memory to you. A memory

you won't have for long if you continue to interrupt me." He looks at me, his voice softening. "What is your name?"

"*Verena* belongs to me," Bane snarls at the very dangerous alpha. By all the gods of the moon and stars, Bane is a fucking idiot. "I'm the alpha of this pack and you—"

Elias growls, the sound rumbling deep in his chest. "You are nothing but a brat hiding in the shadow of a coward. Every minute of my attention you steal from my mate, I will add to the time I take in killing you. Something I am increasingly looking forward to."

"I am not your mate," I snap at him.

Elias grins my way for a moment. It's like he's enjoying all of this. What is wrong with him? He looks back at his wolves. "Kill the betas and bring me the alpha's son. Make sure he can't walk or shift. If you find Alpha Alferis, bring him to me alive. I have questions before he dies."

Bane runs off, the smartest thing he has done in a long time. I hope Elias's wolves catch him. Three of them go after Bane and the remaining betas, who've all abandoned their seemingly future alpha without a second thought. They really are a bunch of cowards.

Elias snarls at them before turning his attention back to me. "I am sorry you've had to deal with them, but that part of your life is over now, little mate."

Sweat trickles down the back of my neck as I look between my home and Elias. I can't let him take me, not without warning Mera. Elias holds his hands up. "I do not seek to hurt you." Something in his gaze shifts. Darkens, almost. "With the gods as my witness, no one will hurt you again so long as there's a moon in the sky and breath in my lungs. I vow it, *Verena*. You're safe now."

His vow does something to me, something that terrifies me. It makes me want to believe him.

"Safety means little to me," I breathe out, looking into his eyes. "I don't just want to be safe anymore."

"Then what do you want?"

His whisper sweeps over me like a gentle caress. *I want revenge.* But I bite those words back and instead try to figure out if I can make some deal with him. He's clearly insane if he thinks I'm his mate, and he won't be happy when he learns I'm just an Omega who can't shift and I don't even want him.

Or anyone else, for that matter, ever again.

If only my body would listen to me. Why do I feel so flushed beside him?

Screams from the pack echo behind us, the night carrying their pleas to the gods. Elias cocks his head to the side but doesn't pull his eyes away from me. "I will help them. We were nearby when I heard a scream that nearly shattered my own blade." His brow arches. "You wouldn't happen to know who managed to destroy every chime in the pack and let those savages in, now would you?"

I keep my face perfectly blank. "No, I would not."

His smile is ridiculously sexy. *Fuck.* "I didn't expect to find you here. They have somehow been hiding you from me but that ends tonight. The star gods led me to you. We will thank them together with our mating in my pack."

Great. Another wolf who worships the old gods. The very gods Alferis sacrificed my friend to. I take another step toward the house despite everything in my body telling me to run to him, not away from him. His expression tightens.

"Don't run," he warns in a low, dark whisper.

I laugh at the irony. "You're the second person to say that to me tonight."

"Stay," he commands, and it pisses me off because I'm not one of his pack. I'm done listening to anyone who tells me what to do. I played the good little Omega to keep Kris and Mera safe, and it didn't work. Kris is dead. Mera might be, too, for all I know.

I raise my eyebrows at him. "No."

Saying that word to an alpha makes me shiver. Gods, it feels so good.

“Fuck,” he swears as I run straight toward the house, leaving him chuckling in my wake.

I know I’m not going to be able to outrun him, but there are weapons in my home, and I could use them to bide Mera some time to escape. That’s if she’s even in the house.

When I reach the door, I cast a swift look over my shoulder, frowning when I discover Elias isn’t pursuing me. I quietly listen for his footsteps, but nearby shouting drowns them out. I press my back to the side of the house and slide to the edge, peering around the corner. Elias and the fae from earlier stand a few feet apart.

“Do not interfere,” Elias warns in a dangerously low voice. “You should run while you still can.”

The fae only scoffs. “Did you tell her that? I won’t be going anywhere until you leave the girl alone.”

Elias’s resorting growl sends shivers down my spine. “Very well then. The hard way it is.”

He lunges into the air and shifts into the biggest black wolf I’ve ever seen. He lands on the fae teeth first, but the fae is swift on his feet and slices a dagger through Elias’s front paw while blocking his teeth with his forearm. He doesn’t even wince when Elias clamps his jaw and bites down hard on the fae’s skin. The two of them collapse to the ground, the fight between them nothing short of barbaric.

Blood pours from their wounds as they claw, bite, and stab at each other. For a moment, an urge to stop their vicious fight consumes me, but it’s overpowered by the need to find Mera. I leave them tearing at each other and rush into the house, my whole body shaking.

“Mera! Mera, where are you?”

Panic grips hold of me when there’s no reply. What if they took Mera too? What if they already killed her? I hurry through the rooms, pausing only when I reach Kris’s room. A sob wrenches from me as I look around the very place she was always singing and dancing. Sometimes driving me nuts by banging on her pink walls. She was alive here. Her scent still

lingers, sweet and floral. I have to move. I can't stay here and grieve for her when I'm not safe.

And for all I know, neither is Mera.

I turn to leave but something flashing under her pillow catches my attention. I ignore the thrashing of my heart and walk over slowly to turn the pillow. Kris's necklace sits below it. It's the only thing she was allowed to keep from her parents' home before she was kicked out. I run my finger over the silver star and the black crystal stone in the middle of it. I always thought it was unusual. Kris never left the house without wearing it. Rage consumes me. They probably didn't give her time before they dragged her to the altar.

I slip the chain around my neck and leave the room. When I close the door behind me, a part of my heart is sealed inside the room along with her memory. There will be time for me to grieve. I need to find Mera first and get the fuck out of here.

Mera's room is next door and I rush inside, pausing at the sight of all the mess. The drawers in her chest have been thrown wide open, her clothes scattered over the floor and her weapons gone. A note rests on the foot of the bed. Wolves howl outside when I pick it up, making me jump. There's still time to get out of here alive.

I sit on the edge of the bed and run my fingers over my and Kris's names. From the first sentence alone, I can tell she didn't know about the offering.

She didn't know they were about to kill one of us.



Kris,

I'm sorry I won't be here when you get back from picking your herbs. Something urgent has come up in the north and I've been commanded to leave with no delay at the alpha's instruction. I cannot tell you more. I will come back before the spring. Try not to worry. Verena will take care of you, just like I know you'll take care of her and help keep her out of trouble.

*There's enough coin under the bed to keep you both going until
I'm back.*

I love you so much, my fire-hearted girls.

Stay strong, and don't let these bastards put out your fire.

~Mera

A SCREAM of frustration rips out of my throat as I tear up the note and throw it across the room. Of all the places in this forsaken world, north is *not* a place I want to be heading. Mera is fine to go north since she can shift to keep warm and run faster from predators. I don't have a chance of catching up to her. She could be hours away. And I can't shift. It's even colder up north.

But at least, I hope, Mera is still alive. I tell myself that over and over as I rise from the bed. I've been through worse than this, and I can get through this too. I have to.

Otherwise, Kris died for nothing.

I need to avenge her.

I carefully lift what remains of the rag off my body and kick the scraps across the room. The burns from the chains are healing, albeit slowly. I rummage through Mera's beside drawer and breathe a sigh of relief when I find healing ointment. The burns should be gone by sunrise if I use enough of it. Hopefully they won't leave any scars.

Hissing through the pain, I lather the ointment generously over my wounds, then I search Mera's wardrobe. I drag out one of her long green tunics and a pair of thick black leggings, both lined with fur. Once I pull them on and grab a pair of knee-length dark brown boots, I turn to the mirror and twist my matted hair into a braid that falls down my back. My eyes land on a deep cut carved into my left cheek. Smaller scratches surround it, probably from the crystals shattering.

Was that power really me?

When I screamed, I felt pain begging to be released. I didn't feel the warm caress of magic coursing through my body. I didn't feel powerful. I just felt totally and utterly

heartbroken, and angry. So angry that I wanted to bathe the entire world in Alferis's blood.

I shake my head. Now isn't the time to think about all that. I need food, warmer clothes, and my bow. I step out of Mera's room and head toward my own. But I stop short when Elias, leaning against the doorframe with his arms crossed, smiles at me. Blood covers his face and clothes, and there's a deep gash in his chest, but his injuries aren't as bad as I expected them to be. For some unknown reason, I can't help but wonder about the fae.

I pause to glare at the wolf. "Still alive."

His white teeth are a stark contrast to all the blood when he smiles. "You sound delighted."

"Hardly. More like surprised. And what're you doing inside my home? Get out!"

He ignores me and nods to my bedroom instead. "You should pack a bag, little mate. We're leaving."

I cross my own arms stubbornly. "I'm not going anywhere with you. Get out of my house!"

His smile vanishes and he unfolds his arms. "You're my mate. Do you know how long I have searched for you?" He moves closer to me, his deep voice causing goose bumps to scatter over my body. "I want to claim you, right here, right now, before anyone else can touch you. But unlike some alphas, I'm not a beast. At least, not always. We can get to know each other first once we're back at my pack. You'll be safe there with me." He glances at my burns, his gaze hardening, then it softens when he looks me in the eye. "No one will ever hurt you ever again. Let me protect you and treat you the way you should've always been treated."

For a moment, his words render me speechless. I search for a response but nothing comes. Who the fuck is this alpha? I am not his mate. I can't be. I can't even shift. Too ashamed to admit that, I reply instead, "I'm already engaged."

Although he knows he's getting under my skin. He can no doubt hear my heart racing in my chest. After everything I've

been through at the hands of men, why am I letting this one get to me?

Why do I want to believe him?

“Bane is weak and spineless,” Elias snarls, “just like his father. They made your pack suffer for years. They made *you* suffer. Now listen to me closely. I will burn this entire pack to the ground before I let them hurt my mate again.” He takes a step. “You belong to me, now, and always. The gods have decided it.”

“Fuck the gods!” Elias raises his eyebrows in response to my outburst. “I condemn them! They are the reason my sister, a sixteen-year-old girl, was just killed in front of me. I’m not listening anymore to things the gods suggest, including being your mate. Now get. Out. Of. My. House!”

His shocked expression stays for a moment. He looks genuinely surprised by my rejection of him, as if he hadn’t contemplated me doing that at all. For me to also condemn the gods publicly is something unheard of in our lands. But I’m tired of them. I’m tired of alphas.

I’m just so fucking tired.

“I don’t need a big alpha like you to save me,” I say, barely able to hold back my tears. “The last time I let someone do that, he brought me to live with a starving pack, made my life miserable, and then killed my sister when I refused to mate with him. I’m going to save myself for once, so if you could please step out of the way and get the fuck out of my house, that would be great.”

But he doesn’t move. He just remains blocking the doorway, his amused eyes studying me.

“I can tell you are going to be trouble for me.” He pushes off the door and closes the gap between us. “This is for your own good.”

Before I can even put up a fight, he grabs my waist and hauls me over his shoulder as if I weigh nothing. I kick and scream at him, and slam my fists against his back, but his arm

secures me with a grip too tight for me to escape. Rage sears through me.

“Let me go! Let me go, you big bastard!”

Elias chuckles. “Ah, we are going to get along very well. My inner pack will like you and that spitfire mouth of yours.”

“Fuck your inner pack!” My retort just makes him laugh harder. “And fuck you!”

He laughs all the way down the stairs. “The only one I’ll be fucking later is my mate.”

Tightening his grip on me at the front door, he kicks it open and hauls me outside. If he thinks I’m going to play the role of his little mate after everything I’ve gone through, he’s wrong. I will never be an alpha’s plaything ever again.

Blood rushes to my head as a cool breeze sweeps over me outside. On the ground in front of my home, the fae who fought Elias is on his knees. His shackles are made from some kind of dark metal that gleams pale blue in the moonlight. *Ironice*. I’ve never seen the material in person, it’s too rare and expensive for us, but I’ve read about it in books.

I had no idea ironice could also strip a fae of their powers and make them weak.

It practically makes them human.

Seven black wolves surround the fae. His injuries are only slightly more severe than Elias’s, but unlike the Vaega alpha, the fae isn’t smiling. He’s looking down at the two female fae lying dead before him. His left ear twitches at the arrival of another wolf. This one has shifted into his male form. His chest is exposed, completely covered in blood and what I think are tattoos. His long dark hair is twisted into a complicated braid that trails down his muscular back, a stark contrast to his olive skin tone. He tilts his head and the hollow crystal securing the tip of his braid glints in the light. Elias wears a similar crystal in his hair, only it’s green.

Why didn’t the fae react to these crystals? He should’ve been writhing in agony from the sight of them.

The male says something to one of the wolves and then pats him on the head. When the wolf snarls at him, he laughs and shrugs before he walks over to us. He very briefly takes me in an amused look on his face.

“Kidnapping your own mate, Eli?” He pauses beside the alpha and shoots me a playful grin. “Your charm didn’t work on this female, huh?”

“Nope,” Elias replies as he dumps me on the ground. I make a run for it but he yanks me back and quickly ties a thick rope around my hands. His touch is infuriatingly gentle though. I glare at him as he secures the final knot, then when he tries to bind my feet, I kick the side of his face, landing one glorious hit. His men laugh as a wide grin stretches over my lips.

Elias only shakes his head with a long sigh. “It appears my mate hates me. But she hasn’t tried to kill me yet, so I guess we’re off to a good start.” He releases my bound hands and gently lifts my chin, forcing me to look him in the eye. “I have high hopes this is a foundation we can build on together.”

I snatch my head away from him. “Keep hoping because that will never happen!” He merely chuckles in response, and it makes me want to kick him again, only this time between the legs. I glare at him as he stands up. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“So much,” the other wolf laughs with him. “So very much. I could make a list for you, if you’d like?”

“Alix.”

Elias saying his name immediately silences the wolf, though he winks at me again when I catch his eye. He must be from Elias’s inner pack. Whatever that means.

Elias glares at the fae and spits on the dead bodies before turning to his men. “The fae comes back with us. He will be tried before the gods and his fate decided by them. Unlike his *false* gods,” Elias spits those words out, “his fate will be decided fairly and without prejudice.”

A few of the wolves whine, but they all bow their heads in agreement.

Elias turns to Alix. “Search the pack. Kill any fae you find and save who you can. Females and children are to be rescued first. You will take them safely to our pack so they can be sworn in. Any males who survived the attack must swear fealty to me before being aided. I am going ahead with my mate.” He points to three wolves and then nods to the fae. “Bring the captive with us.”

All seven wolves howl before they take off into the forest. Although I can’t see them clearly, at least fifty other wolves wait for them there, visible only by the moon reflecting off their eyes. Elias, Alix, and the three wolves move out of earshot to talk amongst themselves. Elias looks over at me while he talks. I turn my back to him and rest my head against my knees.

I just want this nightmare to end. *How am I going to get out of this now?*

I have no weapons, food, or supplies. I know the forest like the back of my hand, but I wouldn’t survive a day with a pack of wolves hunting me down. I feel the fae’s eyes on me as I ponder my limited options, and I spy a glance at him, surprised when he doesn’t look away.

His intense eyes bore into my own, as sharp as the black crystal resting on a silver chain against his chest. It reminds me of the one I found in Kris’s room, except this crystal is bigger and glows whenever the moon hits it. The fae catches me inspecting it and a sneer twists his lips.

“My name is Rueven,” he whispers, his voice dripping with venom. “Remember it, for you are the last wolf I will ever show mercy. You have a debt to pay me now.”

“I never asked for your mercy,” I hiss at him.

His eyes gleam like emerald shards in the darkness. “A debt to a fae is binding. I spared your life, and in turn, you are going to get me out of this. You owe me.”

I turn my head away from him and look up at my house. No candle by the kitchen window. No rabbit stew cooking on the stove. Nothing but a ghost of what used to be.

“I have my own problems to deal with, fae, and I don’t trust you.”

He smirks. “You should never trust a fae. Not even me.”

When I spot the blood dripping down the porch steps, I see Kris dying all over again on the altar, her own blood pooling over the sides to fill the ground below it. I should have fought harder to save her. All I’ve done is get captured by another alpha who thinks I’m his fated mate.

CHAPTER
FIVE



Once the Vaega wolves are ready to set off, Elias has me thrown onto his back for the journey to his home. His black wolf is massive, at least three times the size of his male form, and though I'm grateful for the ride, the same travel arrangements are not offered to the fae which I can't help but feel guilty about.

Elias has him dragged through the snow on a chain behind his beta, and that same guilt gnaws at me with every mile as I try not to think about the debt he says I owe him. I didn't ask him for his mercy, even though I know I'd be dead without it.

The cold wind saws at my throat and slices at my cheeks as I hold on to Elias. The navy fur-lined cloak he draped over me before we departed keeps the rest of me shielded from the elements. But again, the same kindness hasn't been given to the fae, and I once more find myself fighting the urge to feel sorry for him. He's a stranger—and fae. Pity is the last thing I should be feeling for him... yet I can't seem to stop myself.

Hours pass by on Elias's back but every minute feels like an eternity. He says he's taking me to his pack, but I don't know where that is. I've never been this close to the border before. The farthest from home I've been was to Rigel to help Kris sell the pieces of jewellery Kris made from broken crystals and pigeon bones. We didn't sell anything for hours until a sweet, rich old lady came and bought all the necklaces.

She bought them out of kindness, and not because she liked them, but she made sure to wear them all for Kris's sake before she walked away. From the snow-capped mountains

lingering in the distance, Rigel is at least another fifty miles away. There are three other packs located over that border but I've never been this far north. I have no idea where we're going.

Still, I catalogue what I can of the journey along the way, storing what information I can for when I'm able to make an escape. I track most of the route toward the mountains. But once dusk passes and dawn settles in the sky, a storm charges its way across the frozen landscape, and the snow that follows makes it impossible to see where we're going. We'll freeze to death at this rate. Fortunately, Elias finds a cave nearby and has his men set up camp there for the night.

It's still warm inside when we enter the small cave. A recently put-out fire surrounded by pelts and empty cans of food litter the ground inside the cave. I hope whoever took residence here stays away until the wolves are gone. Wolves are territorial at the best of times, but a tired and hungry wolf who claims to have found his fated mate... I wouldn't want to be in their shoes, that's for sure.

Even if the wolf in question is categorically insane.

Elias lies down by the fire and waits for me to get off. I slide down his back carefully, my boots sinking into one of the soft pelts. My legs tremble from exertion but I stand still for a moment, aware of Elias's eyes on me, and look at the fae.

Alix yanks the chain attached to his shackles and forces him to his knees by the entrance. The fae collapses, his back pressed to the wall, his clothes torn and his hair crystallized from the snow. They probably expected him to be dead by now, or at the very least, on the verge of so. What did he say his name was again? Rueven? It sounds strangely familiar to me as though I've heard it mentioned somewhere before.

Wasn't there a fae king by that name who once slaughtered an entire pack?

This fae looks too young to be him though. The books always depicted him to be middle-aged with a neatly trimmed beard and eyes like fire.

When Rueven catches me looking at him, he salutes me, and I can't help but shake my head at him, fighting back a smile. I might not like his kind, but he isn't the one responsible for killing Kris. She died at our alpha's hand and his hand only. Not this fae.

Not even the crazy alpha who's kidnapped me.

Elias nudges his wet nose against my arm. I snap my gaze back to him and he looks down at the floor. For such a massively intimidating wolf, his expression and the way the tip of his scarred right ear flops over reminds me of a puppy waiting for a reward.

Alphas aren't cute. The ones I've met are all batshit crazy.

Power twists their minds, as Mera always warned me, and surely this alpha will be no different. The fact my body wants to be near him, and already misses his warmth, means nothing to me. I turn my back on him again. However, I do sit down by the fire, just to warm my hands and give my legs a rest—not to obey his orders.

Elias doesn't shift back like I expect him to. He just sits beside me and watches his men prepare the food. Their travelling provisions are more than what Kris, Mera, and I would eat in a single week. Alix extends to me a plate loaded with fresh meat, potatoes, and some kind of grain. The thought of eating, even despite my hunger, makes me want to throw up.

Eating is the last thing on my mind right now.

But I know I need my strength if I'm to get away from all this, so I take the plate from him and whisper my thanks. The beta's bright green eyes flash with surprise that I spoke to him and I instantly feel a little guilty inside. None of this is his fault. I watch Alix approach the fae next. He looks younger than Elias but not by much. He's just as tanned, though, and I wonder if they get a lot of sunlight wherever their pack is. Probably not if we're headed to the mountains.

In the corner of my eye, Elias watches his beta closely. He growls when Alix offers the fae some scraps to eat. Alix

shrugs before tossing the meat aside. I glare at Elias, for his waste and for his treatment of the fae. He said Rueven would stand trial at his pack, but at this rate, it's unlikely he'll make it past the border if he intends to starve him.

“He'll die if you don't feed him.”

He ignores my comment but his growl grows louder.

“Fine. Then let him starve. I just hope you're ready for a war.”

Elias looks at me, and so does every one of his men. Why did I say that? The words just tumbled out before I could catch them. But I can't just sit by and let them treat him like this. Guilty or not, their behaviour is no less despicable than my own alpha's.

“He's no ordinary fae warrior,” I say. “He's... royalty.”

Alix stops eating and tilts his head at me. “How do you know that?”

“That crystal around his neck—it's a symbol of his social standing. I... I read about them in a book once.” *Why am I lying?* “They carry a powerful enchantment.” *Why am I trying to protect him?* “That one is black which means it curses those who kill the person wearing it. I hope you're all ready for your dicks to fall off because that's a powerful curse, that one. May the gods protect you from it. If they still can.”

I go back to eating my food, suddenly finding my appetite again. It takes several moments before any of the wolves return to what they were doing, their movements noticeably more cautious now. Alix nods at the alpha and then throws Rueven the rest of his meat. I hide my smirk from them as I eat a little of the rice.

Debt. Paid.

Rueven can get out of my head now along with the slight guilt that accompanies any thoughts of him.

He chuckles before he picks up the meat and takes a bite of it. My smirk widens. It's then I notice Elias is no longer looking at the fae, but at me. Unlike Alferis, I don't get the

impression this alpha is trying to stare me down and force me to look away from him.

It's more like he's... trying to figure me out.

Good luck, buddy. I still haven't figured myself out yet.

Once I've eaten most of the rice and a little of the meat on my plate, Elias stands. I watch his movements closely. He takes one look at the fae, then me, and then he shifts. His huge and very naked body appears right in front of me. I stare at him, my mouth open wide, and a blush over my cheeks. He doesn't even bat an eyelid at how exposed he is. In fact, I think he's enjoying it, if his smirk is anything to go by.

Damn him.

He takes my plate and sits it by the fire, then he pulls me to my feet.

“Where are we going?”

He doesn't answer as he leads the way deeper into the cave. His silence only makes me nervous. I trace the strange tattoo on his back with my eyes, hoping to use it as a way to calm myself, especially since I've never seen a tattoo that glows like pure starlight before. Something itches in the back of my mind from my schooling on fated mates and a mark, yet I can't remember what I was taught.

But every second that passes, my nerves continue to grow until all I can hear is my own erratic heartbeat. Maybe I pushed it too far with the whole curse thing. But I couldn't just let them starve the fae. I know what it feels like to be so hungry you'd eat anything, even the rats in the gutter. I wouldn't wish that on anyone.

Elias takes me to where another fire has been made and more pelts laid out. Only one of them is long enough to sleep on. He obviously expects me to sleep beside him. Although his men are just out of earshot, I hear them laughing occasionally, but thankfully their chatter dies by the time it reaches this side of the cave. I still don't want to sleep next to Elias. I barely know him.

“We’ll sleep here tonight,” he says, gesturing to the bedrolls.

“I’m fine sleeping with the other prisoner.”

His eyes narrow. “My mate sleeps at my side where I know she will be safe. Don’t make this difficult. I’m quite happy to throw you over my shoulder again, little mate. Or my knee. The choice is yours.”

I glare at him, my blood boiling. “Don’t you trust your own men?”

“It’s not my men I lack trust in. That forest is filled with creatures who would love an Omega snack and I would prefer some sleep before saving your ass... *again*.”

The hint of concern hidden behind his snide remark takes me by surprise. He rummages through a bag beside the bed and drags on a pair of black shorts.

“That was quite the clever trick you pulled back there with the fae,” he says, dragging my focus back to him.

I lift my chin when he looks at me from the corner of his eye. “It wasn’t a trick. At best, it was just a hopeful assumption.”

His smirk appears again, and I hate that I don’t hate it. He’s the first alpha I haven’t wanted to punch. At least, not *every* time I look at his face. I’ve only wanted to punch him twice so far which worries me.

“And at worst, it was a lie,” he counters, yanking on the shorts. “A clever one at that.” He then grabs a canteen from the bag and drinks from it. Droplets of water slide out his mouth and trickle down his scarred torso. “Now my wolves are worried they’re going to wake up tomorrow without their prized possessions.”

“Good,” I hear myself say, my throat drying. “So they should be worried. Even Alferis never treated his prisoners this poorly,” I add, not sure why I’m still lying. I just don’t want him to be cruel to the fae. There’s enough cruelty in the world already.

Elias's playfulness melts from him, and a dark look twists over his face. "No. Alferis just treated his own pack like that." Something dark and violent flashes in his eyes when he looks at me. Then he nods to the pelt. "We'll set off as soon as the storm clears. Come rest by the fire."

I don't move. "If by 'come rest by the fire' you mean 'let's fuck' then you have massively... misread... the situation..."

My words drift off as he marches over to me, his face set in a grim line. He looks down at my clenched hands and his frown deepens. My whole body is scrunched, braced for whatever will come next. But Elias doesn't strike me or lash out. He doesn't even move. He just looks down at me, the lines on his forehead disappearing.

Tears prick my eyes, and a tremor catches my lower lip. "I've just lost everything that ever mattered to me. You're out of your damn mind if you think I'll jump into bed with you."

He reaches for my hand and uncurls my fingers slowly before gently, so very gently, running his thumb over the back of my hand. His gentleness takes me by surprise, but not as much as my response to it. My whole body floods with heat the moment he caresses me.

"I once searched every realm under the stars for my mate, refusing to believe they no longer existed. It's taken me a lifetime to find her." His throat jerks as his eyes lock onto my own. "I'd wait another lifetime for you, Verena, if the gods forced me to." He releases my hand but doesn't pull his gaze away. "Our mating can wait until you're ready. I won't touch you tonight, but you *will* sleep beside me."

Chains scraping over a hard floor echo in the background. Elias lifts a brow. "Or would you prefer an iron cage to sleep in like your friend?" At the sight of my own brows rising, he shrugs. "Safety precaution. My men believe it will keep the curse contained should anything happen to the fae," he adds with a grin.

Not wanting to spend the night in a cage, I step away from Elias and settle down on one of the pelts. He follows suit and claims the pelt beside me. As soon as his body brushes against

my own, my entire body flares as if he's set my very soul on fire. I shuffle away from him even though deep down I already miss his warmth. I wince, holding my stomach as a cramp slams hard into me and heat pools between my thighs. What the fuck?

Silence stretches between us, broken only by the fire crackling and his men laughing at the other side of the cave as the cramp fades along with the heat. Several moments pass and then Elias sighs and gets up.

I tense and watch him approach me, waiting for him to go back on his word. But he shifts into his wolf and curls around my body, his tail draped over me like a blanket. His wolf immediately puts me at ease. Although I don't quite understand why, I welcome it, and turn on my back to stare up at the ceiling. Starlight bleeds through small cracks in the cave and I can see a little of the moon. The moon and stars are always so close together, united in a sky that serves the same purpose, yet in my world, they're seen as enemy gods who couldn't be farther apart.

Like wolves and fae. Like Rueven and me. And yet... I want to help him.

CHAPTER
SIX



Dawn claws its way into the sky when we step out of the thick, dense forest the next morning. My boots crunch through the dying leaves as a crisp wind scatters them around me like a god sighing over the treetops. They're covered in so many leaves that the vivid shades of orange, red, and yellow rival the sun's beauty, and for a moment, it takes my breath away, allowing me to forget everything that happened last night as I focus entirely on the beautiful view in front me.

I've never experienced autumn before. Not really.

The Solarius pack's land is too cold and dead—the clouds so thick and grey that the sun could never shine through them. Not like it does here. It was like being trapped in an eternal winter back home. But here, the sky is blue and cloudless, and from this point on top of the steep hill, I can see everything all the way to the horizon. It's more than breathtaking, actually.

It's freeing—as if I'm seeing the world for the first time again.

“Welcome to the Vaega Pack,” Elias says from beside me. “Your home.”

Drifting my eyes down from the sky, I take in the pack before me. It's enormous, bigger than I ever imagined. Even the skyscrapers built by the old fae themselves in the mortal realm don't hold a candle to this pack. My mouth parts as I look at the four tall, grass mountains that curl around the pack, almost like a half-moon protecting its people.

The majority of the pack buildings are nested within half the circle, but I spot several small and large houses dotted up the mountains. They're big structures within the pack, but most are small buildings that surround a diamond-shaped lake in the centre.

Green bricked paths wind off from the lake in every direction like a child has drawn swirls inside each of the half-moons. There must be hundreds, if not thousands, of houses down there, and each of them glitter as I realise they're made of crystal.

This is the crystal pack I once read about. It's like every house is made of pure transparent glass. On the edges around the pack stand enormous crystal towers with huge chimes hanging from them, each a different colour. Their ringing reaches me even all the way up here. I once used to find their presence soothing, but now it only makes me think of Kris with her throat slit and her blood pouring over all the broken chimes...

I blink a few times to push the memory away and fight the tears clawing their way into my eyes. "Do you mine the mountains? I read that's what the Vaega pack is known for."

I just never knew where the pack was located. It's no wonder they've kept their location under wraps to most. It's practically drowning in riches beyond measure.

Elias nods and looks over his land with noticeable pride. "Yes. If you're interested, I'll take you down to the mines. They're rich with crystals for our chimes and protection. My ancestor was said to have run from attacking fae into the mountains to hide there with his mate and found the fae didn't follow. It was how we discovered that the crystal is our best defence against their magic."

He looks back at the fae still locked in the iron cage, his eyebrows furrowing. "One of them, anyway. But perhaps their magic isn't what we have been told to fear any longer. That fae attacked me with weapons, not magic."

Rueven looks dead at me, and I swiftly turn my head. I tried to help him. It's not my fault it resulted in him being

caged like an animal and then dragged on a horse and cart the rest of the journey. Who knew the wolves would care about losing their precious manhoods so much...

Alix coughs beside us, making his presence known, and nudges my shoulder with his. “Don’t fall for the old ‘follow me into the caves and I’ll take you down to the mines’ pick-up line. Make him work harder for it.”

Elias glares at his beta while my lips twitch in response. “Remind me why I shouldn’t push you off this hill?”

Alix grins at him. “Because I’m pretty and your best friend.”

Elias growls in warning but his beta only laughs. I turn my attention back to the pack, more so to stop myself from laughing. They have very strange customs here.

There is so much to look at in the Vaega pack, from the lush forests of red at the edges of the buildings to the clear green sea beyond the mountains. I focus on the water stretching in every direction, the sunlight glistening off the waves. Its green surface looks like the jade necklace Mera sometimes wore on special occasions. She once told me it reminded her of the sea and now I know what she meant and why she loved that necklace so much. The sea is so beautiful and calming.

“I’ve never seen the sea before. It’s so beautiful.”

It’s not a compliment for his pack—even though I could think of a hundred compliments right now—but more of a statement. Complimenting anything of Elias’s might give the wrong idea, such as that I want to be his mate. But there is no denying how beautiful his pack is. It truly is a sight to behold.

Elias falls quiet by my side, letting me take all of it in and not pushing me to leave this spot. The warm sun shines over my skin, and I close my eyes for a moment, embracing it. Elias watches me. I sense him watching me without even looking his way. This insane idea that I’m his mate is likely the only thing keeping me alive.

It *is* insane. Fated mates don't exist anymore, and they haven't for a very, very long time, to the extent that people believed they were fairy tales. The word *mate* is just another word for partner now. Fated mates were chosen by the gods, and so far, they haven't been kind to me. I don't believe that has suddenly changed in the last twenty-four hours.

Elias gently touches my elbow, reminding me of how close we slept last night. I pull away from him. He needs to know I have no intention of being his fated mate. There's no such thing. I refuse to accept it even if my body wants to.

"I want to show you everything in my pack," he says, "but if you're tired, we can rest first?"

"Rest," I reply, my tone sharper than intended.

After a whole day riding on Elias's back, I want nothing more than to be alone.

Elias nods. "Then I will give you a quick rundown of my pack while we walk." He steers me alongside him, and I have a feeling if I told him I didn't want to know about his pack, he'd still tell me. "My family has led the Vaega pack since the beginning. Our line goes all the way back to when the wolves and fae were first created by the gods."

I find my eyes drifting back to the fae being dragged in his cage behind us. He watches the city pass him with something akin to boredom on his face. He doesn't seem remotely impressed by Elias's pack, or even bothered by those taunting him and throwing rocks at his imprisonment.

I can't help but wonder what his lands are like hidden deep in the fae forests where no one dares to go. Where the fae controls the very earth under their feet. It's said they have ancient cities where no mortal or wolf ever returns. I turn back to Elias, a shiver running down my spine from the thought.

"I'd like you to meet my mother. She's helping deliver supplies to another pack, but I will send word to her soon. I think you'll like her. She's the only family I've got left after my father died a few years ago."

I cross my arms, ignoring the nervous flutter my heart gives at the mention of meeting Elias's mother. "Did you kill your father in a battle to take the pack?"

His lip twitches. "No." And a light growl echoes from his throat. "Other packs might do that, but it is not part of our traditions. The next alpha takes the pack when the previous alpha decides he no longer wants to rule. My father was old when he decided that he'd had enough, and it was my turn to lead the pack. I was only twenty-two. He died a year later from wolfbane fever."

I wince, so many horrible memories filtering through my mind. "Our pack had an outbreak of wolfbane fever last winter. So many died. I'm sorry."

Elias nods again. "We lost many as well. One of my closest friends unknowingly caught the fever and ended up spreading it to me. My father refused to let anyone but himself care for me, not even my mother. He died not long after I woke from the fever. He caught it from me."

I look down at the ground. "I would have done the same for Kris."

"Your sister?" he quietly asks, and I can only nod.

We walk in silence the rest of the way, Elias talking with his betas now and then. Even though he means well, he's overwhelmed me, especially when he stays at my side, protective and possessive as any alpha wolf.

I've never known an alpha like him and I'm waiting for the apple to drop. He can't be as kind and honourable as he's making out. Alphas are rarely like that. They're known to be horrible, powerful wolves who have ultimate control of their pack. The fact that Elias is the richest alpha there is should only amplify that.

Bane once told me their alpha was cold and heartless and protected his mines like a dragon over its hoard. If Bane was right, then Elias is playing some sort of game. I can't let my guard down. I need to keep my wits about me regardless of what he says.

After a short walk down the hill, we approach the entrance to his pack. I look up at all the beautiful emerald crystals hanging from an archway that stretches over the enormous gold gates. The gates themselves have chimes carved into the middle of them, and they make a lovely sound in the wind when they're opened for us, their movement casting rainbow prisms upon the ground. A male voice booms around me, but there's so many people, I don't see who it comes from.

“The alpha has returned! All cheer for the alpha! Alpha Elias!”

The cheers echo around the pack, chanted over and over, as they celebrate his return. I frown as I watch his wolves rush out of their homes just to gather on the streets to cheer for their alpha. He waves at them, shakes hands with a few, and it's clear he knows all their names. Two kids run up to him and hug his legs. To my utter surprise, he picks them up instead of kicking them away like Alferis would do, and then he spins around with the kids before putting them down again.

His pack... actually seems to love him. They don't fear their alpha like mine did.

I look around for the starving children, for the mortals kept as slaves in chains, for the weaker wolves being pushed about, but I don't see any. The usual things I see in my pack life just aren't here. In fact, all the children look well-fed and their clothes are brightly coloured and well-fitted. The adults are finely dressed, and no one has hollow cheeks from hunger or slim builds with bones visible. It's completely different here.

We turn a corner to a marketplace where every stall is filled with various foods: fish, meat, fruit, vegetables, spices, and even animals to buy. There is so much here. I've never seen this amount of food before. I come to a stop. Elias looks down at me, pausing too. He searches my face like he's trying to read my thoughts.

“Talk to me, Verena.”

“Why aren't your people starving?” I blurt out. “How are they so well? Our pack was starving. Pups died every day from hunger. There was never enough of anything. The fruit

and vegetable crops always died the minute they were sowed. The fish in the nearby lake just disappeared overnight a few years back, and the lake turned black with rot. Animals to hunt became scarce in the forests..." I pause, looking around. "Yet you clearly do not suffer these problems."

There's a pause between us, and I look up at him. Elias gently rests his hands behind his back and carries on walking. I jog to keep up with him.

"Alphas are judged by the moon and star gods. How the alpha acts and the choices he makes decide the pack's fate. I believe the gods were punishing your alpha by starving his people, making them hate him, and turn away. I sent many packages of food to your pack, hearing of your suffering. I believe other packs sent help aid as well. My packages were accepted, but I have a suspicion your alpha did not share his supplies with his pack. There should have been enough food to keep you all well-fed, but looking at you..." Anger flares in his eyes. "I can tell that is not what happened."

I think of the alpha's table littered with food and all the leftovers given to his dogs just to spite us, and I had often wondered where he got it. Now it makes sense. "Was that what you were doing in the forest?" I ask him. "Bringing aid?"

He smiles at me, and it reminds me of the warm sunlight. "No. I will not lie to you, but I can't tell you the entire truth of everything while you're still new here."

I appreciate that he doesn't lie. I'm used to people lying to me. "So you're not going to lie to me, but you're going to avoid telling me things?"

"Yes." He smirks at me. "For your own good, Verena, you must not know everything that happens until you're ready."

I huff. "Just so you know, I really hate it when people say they're doing things for my own good. You realize I'm not a child, right?"

He pauses, leaning into my space, his face way too close to mine, his voice tipped with a growl. "And you do realise I'm your alpha now? You're my mate, my Omega, and I will

protect you whether you like it or not. It's my job to protect everyone in my pack, including, and *especially*, you. So fight me. Hate me. But I will never stop protecting you, Verena."

I breathe in his frost-covered trees and hazelnut scent, hating how it calms my racing heart. "I haven't agreed to be in your pack. I won't be your mate, your Omega, or your anything. So stop it."

He grins, leaning back. "You will be. In time."

Elias's confident response just pisses me off more. "Asshole."

He laughs, patting my back once before he greets yet another wolf, asking about their pregnant wife. We head through the town after he says hello to nearly everyone, and we come to a bridge where three carriages wait with horses strapped to the front of them. The carriages are absolutely stunning made with black metal twisted around white chimes and jagged crystal. The horses are a brilliant white decorated with small chimes hanging from their saddles. When they move, the chimes ring softly through the air.

My stomach rumbles as we walk closer to the carriage. Elias looks down at my centre like I've personally offended him before turning to a man waiting by the carriage. I remember him from our camp. He was the quieter of the three other wolves, with curly red hair that bounced when he walked. He barely looked at me, but when he did, his eyes were kind and he smiled once even though I wanted to punch his alpha for kidnapping me.

"Lordin, get my mate some food before we leave."

"Yes, Alpha," Lordin quickly replies, rushing away before I can tell him I'm fine and I'm not that hungry.

Elias opens one of the carriage doors. "After you. That was another beta of mine."

I climb into the carriage and settle on the velvet seat. Elias slides onto the seat across from me and stretches out his long legs that deliberately brush against my own. My body instantly

heats and a tingling sensation spreads over my skin. I scoot over to the window, pulling my legs away from him.

His lips twitch in amusement. “I’m not going to burn you, Verena.”

“I’d rather not risk it.”

He sighs as I straighten my back. “Do you have any questions? I will answer anything you wish to make you more comfortable in our pack.”

Elias speaks my name like it’s a prayer and I’m his own personal goddess. And the way he says *our pack* as if it’s always been that way makes me rethink my snarky attitude toward him.

“How many betas do you have? Are there any other Omegas here?”

He stretches his thick, muscular arms across the back of the seat. “Concerning betas, I have five. They are locally known as my Inner Pack, and you can trust them.” *I’ll be the judge of that.* “They are my most trusted wolves, and you’ll meet all of them shortly for dinner tonight. We regularly eat and drink together.”

I blow out a breath. “I’d rather not go.”

Elias continues like he didn’t hear me. “As for Omegas, no. I’m aware there is another Omega in the Centari pack, but she is an elder. I will be contacting them, along with the others in our world, about what has happened and perhaps I can invite the elder Omega here to help you.”

My heartbeat increases. “Why do you need to contact the other packs?”

“Your pack was brutally attacked by fae, and the amount of fae present was alarming. I was not aware they had any intentions of attacking wolves as it’s been hundreds of years since they’ve done so. It’s only right that I gather the other alphas from around our world so we can talk about the problem and decide the fate of the captured fae male.”

He looks intently at me. “And as part of our peace agreement, I must tell them about fated mates returning to the world and finding a new Omega female.” He settles back into his seat and scratches at his smooth face. “There was also that scream of power that shattered all the pack defences with the chimes’ destruction.”

My heart pounds harder in my chest and I know he can hear it. It’s basically shouting—it was me. It was me. Me. Me. Me! I try to calm my breathing but it’s useless. Every time Elias looks at me, my pulse races all over again.

“I am not going to hurt you, Verena. I’m going to tell you that over and over until you’re sick of me saying it, but I think you need to hear it more than once. I think you need someone in your life that’s going to tell you repeatedly they’re never going to hurt you.”

His confession makes me feel vulnerable, especially considering the truth in his words. Because in the end, he’s right. Deep down I *do* want someone in my life who would never hurt me. But so far, I’ve been led to believe that will never happen. And Elias is too good to be true. Thankfully, the carriage door swings open, and Elias moves his intense stare to Lordin, who hands him a small box that smells amazing.

“Thank you, Lordin.”

“With pleasure, Alpha,” he quickly responds before shutting the door.

The carriage moves on quickly, and Elias offers me the box. “Here you go. Next time tell me with words if you’re hungry. Your stomach can’t do all the talking for you.” My lips twitch as I take the box, and Elias grins. “Was that almost a smile? I can’t wait to hear you laugh.”

I shake my head at him, trying to hide my smile. It really fades away when I think of laughing with Kris the morning before she died. Laughing over that stupid dress. Elias looks out the window and I follow his gaze. The beautiful and clean streets of his pack sweep by us. Gorgeous green hills roll in the distance beyond the lake. Kris would’ve loved it here. It’s so... peaceful.

“I should warn you that I share my living space with my betas.” Elias’s voice pulls me back. His knee presses into mine and a low cramp stirs in my stomach along with the same heat I felt in the cave. My cheeks brighten but Elias doesn’t comment on it. I would have guessed he hadn’t noticed but his eyes darken ever so slightly before he clears his throat. “I have a formal house in the mountains, but it’s cold and empty, and no one likes to live there.”

I grip the box together, surprised by this. “You live with your betas?”

“Yes. The houses form one large courtyard, each with our own space. We share a kitchen, general lounges, and the main courtyard. You’ll be living with me but—”

“I will not be living with you,” I cut in. “I’ll be happy in the dungeon with the fae captive. Or a cage. I don’t mind anymore. But I’m certainly not *living* with you while I’m your prisoner too.”

He laughs and I hate how much I like the sound in my ears. “I’m really beginning to like you, Verena. The gods have chosen well.”

Delusional. This alpha is totally bonkers.

I lift the box and my mouth waters at the selection of barbecued meats. A fork and napkin rest beside them.

“Lordin chose well,” Elias says. “Alma makes the best barbecued meats. She uses a secret selection of herbs and then slowly roasts them. It’s what I would have gotten you if I thought it was safe to leave you alone and you wouldn’t attempt to run away again.”

I raise my eyebrows. “You’re right about that, at least.”

The carriages take at least half an hour to go through the city. It passes a lake that looks to have crystal formations within the waters. Some of the purple crystals stick out of the surface like they’re trying to reach up to the gods. It’s breathtaking.

We go past the larger homes and move on toward the small woodlands. There’s so many wolves walking around casually,

like they don't have to fear a single thing. There are no slaves here, no chains, no dead bodies littering the dark corners. I don't know quite what to make of all this.

I'm so used to living in fear of where my next meal will come from, of worrying about other wolves attacking me for being an outcast, of being summoned by Bane again, or worse, his father. But now there's a chance I might not have to live that way anymore. It's definitely too good to be true.

When the carriage comes to a halt, Elias climbs out first and offers me his hand to help me down. I keep my box of food with me, ignoring his gesture, and jump out on my own. He just looks more amused, whereas before, I would have been punished for such disrespect.

I should try to be more careful. He's still an alpha at the end of the day, and I don't want to get on his bad side like I did with Alferis. Piss off an alpha too much and they'll rip everything away from you. My chest hurts as I think about Kris, and all I could've done to save her.

Mera is long gone and she won't find me now. I'm not even sure I will be able to find her. I don't have anything to lose here except my life, which I've been clinging to since I was a kid. The Moon and Star gods certainly never gave me a helping hand. Elias watches me, and I refuse to give him any encouragement that I want to be this fated mate.

“Welcome home, Verena.”

I take in the giant stone courtyard in front of me. Black roses crawl along the old white stone walls. All the houses form a square shape with big gates at the front leading to a path that heads into a maze of plants that fills the middle of the courtyard.

Through the thick bushes and flowers, I spot a seating area in the centre. Two small fountains with howling wolves pushing water out of their mouths stand outside the gates, the falling drops sounding like rain. The garden looks cosy like a real home should be. Soft chimes echo from the edges of the courtyard where so many hang in all different colours.

Elias leads me through the black metal gates, and I get a better look at the connecting homes. The white brick houses are all connected to a bigger part in the middle, and the rest are separated by markers in the stone, and each has its own doors.

Elias steers me to the left and opens one of the doors. I'm finding it hard to believe this is his home, nested in with his betas and the rest of the pack. It's just not what I expected. Slowly, I head into a room that smells just like him. What strikes me the most is that his space isn't big. It's cosy and filled with soft furnishings that have a rustic touch. There's a spiral staircase by a large oak bed, and Elias waves a hand at it. "The bathroom's upstairs. I'll show you around the lounges and kitchen we share soon but I have to go. Make yourself at home."

I turn to face him as he heads to the door, my stomach clenching at the thought of him leaving. "Where are you going?"

"Why? Going to miss me?" I roll my eyes at him, and he grins. "I'll take that as a yes. I have alpha stuff to do and it would bore you. Please don't do anything stupid while I'm gone."

He pauses, looking at me long enough that I frown. "Why are you looking at me like I'm going to disappear? I literally couldn't escape here at this moment if I tried."

Elias opens the door, looking back at me, his eyes softening. "I'm still looking at you like I did the moment we met. Like I can't believe you're real."

CHAPTER
SEVEN



“Don’t do anything stupid, he said.” I fall back onto the bed with a loud groan. “Now that’s rich—since there’s nothing *to do* in here.”

I look up and once more study the carvings on the ceiling for a distraction. Every thought of Kris runs through my mind the moment I’m somewhere quiet. And distracting myself from those thoughts seems to be the only way to stop myself from falling apart.

I trace every intricate branch that bends around the beautifully carved moon. Twice now, I’ve counted every leaf, every star, every groove in the painting, and I’ve slept for hours underneath it while dawn passed into dusk. I’ve even been given three meals since Elias left but still he hasn’t once returned. How long does alpha stuff take anyway?

I roll over and stuff my face into the pillow, muffling my screams. A part of me knows I should be thankful for the peace and quiet, and that for once I have a soft, clean bed to sleep on, clothes that fit my body, and as much food as I want. All I need to do is ring the bell beside the bed, and Alma, one of the betas’ mates, brings me a full tray. I *should* be thankful for all this, but I’m only unsettled by it. It’s like I’m subconsciously waiting for everything to be snatched away.

Dragging myself from the bed, I walk barefoot onto the balcony and look up at the moon. Longing fills me. Hurt. Betrayal. Anger. Grief. For so long, I worshipped these gods—both the moon ones and the star ones, in my own little way. I

didn't doubt their existence. I respected their ways. I very nearly let the dark whiteling go before Bane arrived.

"Why did you bring me here?" My lip trembles and for once I don't bite it. For once I let my tears fall as I look up at the moon. "Why did you take her from me?"

A knock on the door causes me to jump back. Quickly wiping my eyes, I hurry inside the room again. The door opens and Alma enters. She curtsies again, and although it's a polite gesture, it makes the scars on my back tingle. The human nobles never let me enter or leave a room unless I curtsied, and if I forgot, I was punished for it.

For a moment. I think back to the boy I knew as a small girl. He was a few years older than me, a wolf shifter, but he was able to shift. The humans hated him more than me and used him like he was nothing more than a dog.

When I was whipped for speaking out of turn, or just being me, he would step between us and take the beating every chance he could. I wouldn't have survived without him. I often think about what happened to him once I left, and if he managed to survive. I used to pray that he escaped from the humans and found peace amongst his kin. I was naive to think I could find peace amongst Alferis and his vicious wolves.

"Supper, my Omega."

"I'm not—" I cut myself off. I've already insisted I am not her Omega and that she can just call me Verena. But she either can't understand my accent or doesn't want to listen to me. "Just leave it there, please."

She nods and sets the tray on the bed, some kind of meat and veg that smells wonderful. Then she just stands there, waiting to be dismissed. At least I think that's what she's waiting for. I stare back at her, unsure how to dismiss a servant. Alferis would bark "leave" if he was in a good mood, or throw things at them if he was in a bad mood. The humans would only nod; sometimes I was too beneath them to be spoken to.

"Thanks, Alma. It looks delicious."

She beams at me and then turns on her heel. The sight of another large plate of food should make my mouth water but it only makes me feel guilty. I've never eaten so much food in a single day. I don't think I could eat another bite and the thought of wasting it like I almost wasted dinner unsettles me.

"Alma?"

She spins around. "Yes, my Omega?"

"Has the other prisoner been given food today?"

The side of her eyes crinkle with a frown. "*Other* prisoner, my Omega? The alpha brought home only one."

I bite down my snarky response. *Yeah, sure he did.* "The fae. Has he eaten anything?"

She shakes her head, and my stomach flips. "The faeborn is to be starved until his trial."

"When is the trial?"

"In three weeks' time, I've been told. Some say that fae can live for years without food. If he passes out, maybe the alpha will step in."

"But in the meantime, they're just going to starve him?" I can no longer keep the disgust from creeping into my voice. "They don't even know if he's guilty yet. He tried to save me!"

Alma's features soften ever so slightly. "It is the way of our pack. The fae have killed many of our own and starved them in the past too. That was before we discovered the strength of the crystals, of course, but we do not forget. Three weeks without food is nothing compared to what his people did to us, my lady."

But he didn't do it, I want to say, but I manage to restrain myself. I don't know Rueven enough to say he hasn't killed or starved my kind before. The fact that he showed mercy to me, however, makes me think that he hasn't. He could've easily killed me when he had the chance, but he didn't.

"Can I trust you, Alma?"

My question seems to take her off guard. She lifts her eyebrows at me. “Of course, my Omega. I am here as your friend and to serve. Omegas and Lunas...they are fairy tales told to us to help us sleep, beautiful and rare. It’s a true honour to have even met you.”

I move to the bed and sit beside the tray, patting the space beside me. Alma sits quickly, her honey-coloured eyes glancing at my own nervously. I offer a smile to try to settle her nerves. She has the same kindness on her face as her mate, and something tells me I can trust her. Not completely, not right now anyway, but a little to begin with.

And a little is all I need right now.

“Would you believe today is the first day I’ve seen a tree in autumn in over a decade?” Her brows lift higher and I chuckle. “I know it sounds crazy. But the pack I was in, everywhere was covered in snow all the time. The trees were always frozen or dead. But I also used to live in the mortal realm. I was a slave for a nobleman who had this big ass estate outside the village. It had a huge stone wall built around it so no one could see in or out. Apparently I was left outside it when I was a baby.

“Anyway, for ten years, I never left that estate. I never saw what the village looked like or what existed outside the wall. I wasn’t allowed past it because they said I didn’t belong in their realm. But one day...”

A sad smile plays over my lips as my words flow out, for some reason unable to be silenced. “One day, my friend and I climbed on top of the greenhouse while everyone was still asleep, and I saw an orange tree in the distance. Just one single, orange tree in the middle of a dried-out field, and I remember thinking to myself how strange this tree looked. How different from the ones depicted in the manor’s paintings. It gave me hope that just because I was different, I still had a place in the world. I’ll never forget that feeling. That tree. It changed my life.”

My smile fades and bitterness rises within me. Alma listens to my every word, but I can no longer bring myself to

look at her. I glare down at the floor.

“The humans dragged me off the greenhouse. Then the master whipped me severely for having glimpsed at my own freedom. I’ve always believed that if more people were less like them, then maybe there wouldn’t have been a war. Maybe we wouldn’t all hate each other so much.” Nodding to the plate of food, I say quietly, “Will you take this to the fae? I know he’s a prisoner, but everyone deserves to eat.”

Despite the tears in her eyes, Alma shakes her head. “I can’t go against my alpha’s wishes.” Then she leans in and lowers her voice to a whisper. “Just like I *can’t* stop you from crossing the courtyard to the other side of the house, then waiting until the bell rings and the kitchen empties before taking the stairs down to the dungeons. I also can’t advise you to *not* take the extra loaf of bread and cheese that will be sitting on the kitchen table.” She stands and shakes her head again. “I’m sorry, my Omega, but I’m afraid I cannot assist with this.”

I watch her walk to the door, a huge smile on my face. Before she reaches for the handle, I call out to her again.

“Hey, Alma?”

She looks over her shoulder at me; she, too, is smiling. “Yes, my Omega?”

“It’s an honour to meet you too—Omega, luna, or not. Kind people are treasures in this world.”

Her smile widens before she closes the door softly behind her. I waste no time. Grabbing one of the many silk cloths from a drawer inside the wardrobe, I carefully wrap it around the plate of food and then secure it with another cloth underneath to keep any liquid from leaking out. I then drape a lilac cloak over my shoulders, lift the hood over my head, and kick off my ridiculously soft slippers; I’ll be quieter without them. I prefer to be barefooted anyway after years of living on the streets as a kid. It’s just more... familiar to me.

Opening the door, I peer into the hallway outside, surprised to find it empty, and the door unlocked this time. I

wait several moments before moving down the hall quietly. Slivers of moonlight claw through the porticoes and scatter around me as I hurry into the courtyard. Only the sound of the fountains trickling fills the silence. And then a burst of laughter echoes from a window across the courtyard. Steam presses against the glass and smoke blows from a chimney attached to the corner of the roof. That must be the kitchen.

I melt into the shadows by the window. Pressing my back to the stone wall, I wait until the laughter subsides before taking a quick peek. Lordin and Alix sit at the table, laughing and eating together while Alma cleans around them. As though sensing my presence, Alma glances at the window, then she dusts her hands on an apron and reaches for the rope dangling beside the kitchen door.

The bell tolls, and I pull away from the window, hiding myself once more within the shadows of the courtyard. Across the way, perched in one of the many beautiful trees, a pair of crystal-like eyes gleam at me. I know immediately who, or rather *what*, it is.

Fae.

The creature tilts its head at me and flaps its black wings once. I know the raven is a fae by its eyes; they're like pure starlight, glowing whenever the moon hits them. It's the only telltale sign of a fae shifted into an animal which makes it impossible to catch during the day. It's why fae are so good at luring their victims in, usually promising them riches beyond their wildest dreams. I used to see them flying over the slums in the mortal realm about once a month, only ever on a full moon, but this is the first time I've seen one here. How did it get past all the crystals? I'm really starting to doubt the whole crystal thing now.

I frown at the creature. Its crystal eyes gleam at me. I know it can't be Rueven because the wolves stripped him of his powers with the ironice. Maybe it's another fae sent here to free him?

Before I can ask if that's the case, the bird flies away, the sound of laughter coming from the kitchen scaring it off.

Probably a good thing it left. Fae like that usually only bring death whenever it goes.

I shake my head and glance again at the window. The kitchen is finally empty. I clutch the parcel to my chest and tiptoe around the corner, through another portico, and head toward the kitchen. The stairs are located beside it through a stone archway in the wall.

I glance over my shoulder before darting into the kitchen. I grab the bread and cheese from the table and hurry back to the passageway. The spiral stairs leading to the dungeon are narrow and steep, so I take my time descending. Light flickers at the end, guiding my way down, and the air grows noticeably thicker and unpleasant with each step. But it doesn't bother me. I've spent years living under worse conditions.

When I enter the dungeon, the fae sits with his back pressed to the wall, his face tilted toward the barred window across from him. Dried blood and dirt cover his skin. His hair is loose and matted, strands of it veiling his face like a shadow. A nasty bruise frames his left eye when it turns to look at me. My breath hitches at the way the moon bleeds through the window and bathes him in a soft, ethereal glow.

Even in this state, the fae is beautiful.

Otherworldly, like the star gods who created him.

He watches me approach with mild curiosity. "Save your pity for me, Mercy."

I roll my eyes and sit opposite him, setting the plate between us. "I'm not pitying you. I'm just sick of being cooped up in a room all day and I wanted some company. My name is Verena, by the way. Not Mercy."

His mouth twitches. "Are our hosts not treating you very well?" He sweeps a hand around the dungeon, and I notice his knuckles covered in dried blood. "As you can see, they've been ever so kind to me."

A wry grin stretches my own lips. "So they have. Want some?" I tear a bit of bread and offer him it. He doesn't move. "It's not poisoned," I add.

“That sounds very like what someone who poisoned this would say.” He grabs the bread regardless and holds it up. “This doesn’t settle our debt, you know.”

“I know.”

He eats the bread and I watch him with a barely suppressed grin on my lips. I’d probably think the food was poisoned too. I dip a small bit of the bread into the gravy and take a bite, more to reassure him that the food is not, in fact, poisoned.

He raises a brow before following suit. He devours all of it rather quickly, which makes a pit in my stomach drop as I realise he definitely hasn’t eaten in a long time. We watch each other for two seconds too long before he finally clears his throat. Nothing but crumbs between us.

“Why are you down here? You can’t be stupid enough to not know I’m still dangerous even in these chains. What would your alpha think?”

I ignore the way he says alpha, pure disgust in his tone. He carries on when I don’t reply.

“Have you come to let me out? If you have,” he pauses with a smile that I’m sure most women would beg on their knees to see again. “I could reward you.”

I snort. “Like I could get you out of this pack. I can’t even get myself out.”

His eyes darken ever so slightly, something I wouldn’t see unless I was this close. “Do you want to escape? Is he hurting you? Forcing you? I can smell he hasn’t fucked you yet—”

“I haven’t decided,” I cut him off, my cheeks burning.

He leans back, looking disappointed, and plays with a loose button on his tunic. “If you change your mind, we could make a deal.”

I shake my head at him. “Everyone knows making a deal with a fae is like saving a starving wolf. It’s all fine and well until the wolf realises it’s hungry again and eats you.”

Rueven laughs at that, and it makes my heart jump. This fae isn’t tricking me into anything no matter how disgustingly

attractive he is.

“I’m getting used to this place,” I say. “Well, sort of. I’m yet to meet everyone I live with, but you’re right. He hasn’t forced himself on me or even shown me anything but kindness.” I pause, not sure whether I should tell him too much. I feel like ever since coming here, I tell too much of myself to everybody I meet.

Rueven raises an eyebrow. “Wolves cloak themselves in the shadows before revealing their true natures. Be careful.”

The same could be said of fae. I don’t say that, but I’m sure he knows what I’m thinking. This fae somehow gets under my skin with every conversation. A smart person would stay far, far away, and yet I keep coming back. It’s not just for the company. I have to know something.

“You were there at the sacrifice, right?”

His lips peel back in disgust. “I was.”

That reaction alone makes me feel more at ease opening up to him. *Kris*. I push thoughts of her out of my mind for a moment because something else happened that day.

“Did you see everything that happened?”

His lips tilt up. “Do you mean did I see you use a tremendous amount of power that shattered all your crystals?” He laughs. “Yes. I saw every bit of that.”

When I don’t say a word, only the sound of my heart beating in my ear, he leans in. “I’m guessing the alpha here doesn’t know you’re a ticking time bomb? When you lose control next, it will be over for them all. Now you’ve unlocked your power, you will have a hard time not knocking out all the crystals they have. I do hope, for this pack’s sake, that they don’t hurt or abuse you.”

“They won’t hurt me.” My voice is weaker than I’d like.

Rueven only rattles his chains to prove his point. I ignore him. “What was that power?” I ask. “Do you know? Is it something an Omega can do?”

For a moment, he looks at me like I'm some young, vulnerable female that he has no idea what to do with. "You really don't know anything, do you?" His pause makes my heart jump. "It's cruel for someone like you to not know the truth, but we are not friends. For all I know, the alpha sent you down here to pretend to be my ally and gain my secrets."

I sigh, leaning my shoulder on the wall. He's smart to be wary of me. "Elias would lose his shit to know I'm down here. Aren't you going to tell me anything else?"

"Nope," he coolly replies. "Not unless you let me out of here. Then, I'll tell you anything you want. Be anything you want."

He rises to his feet and walks closer, his scent invading my senses and pulling me toward him. My heart pounds from his interest, and butterflies burst inside my stomach.

Suddenly I want him—*need* him.

He's the male in all the fairy tales, all the horror stories I've ever heard about his kind, and yet I can't stop thinking about reaching out and kissing him.

I back away a little bit. At the same time, my body wants to throw me in his direction for him to do whatever he wants with me. Rueven's black eyes drift slowly over my body before fixing on my face. "Let me out. Your body already tells me what you want me to do to you. Come closer, Mercy."

I press my sweaty palms on the stone behind my back. "How about we—play a game?"

His head cocks to the side. "Go on."

"Tell me one thing about yourself, your race, anything really that I wouldn't know," I say, my heart racing and my mouth turning dry, "and then I'll tell you something. You want out of here? Then your best bet is telling me enough good things about you so when it's your trial, I can stand and tell them that maybe we don't have to fear you. Or kill you."

I expect him to tell me to fuck off, but he looks mildly interested. Rueven sits, resting on his arm. "I'm a prince. Your turn."

“I already knew that. If you want more interesting interests from me, I want more interesting ones from you.” I sit across from him with my legs crossed. The need to kiss him lessens slightly and I’m able to think rationally again. Fae and their damn powers! “I have an obsession with stars. I have since I was a kid. The first thing I asked my foster mother, one of my first good memories, was ‘Do stars fall here?’”

“I would have said yes,” he murmurs. “Stars must fall because you are as beautiful as I imagine a star to be.”

My skin pebbles and I clear my throat, unable to reply. Unable to get his compliment out of my head as it repeats over and over. He’s still trying to seduce me to get him out of here. I won’t give in.

“Your turn, fae.”

“Well, since you told me something more personal, I’ll add to my previous answer. I’m the crown prince of the fae realm but not the one who will rule next after my father.”

“That’s still not much of an answer,” I point out. “Are there many princes? Do you have loads of siblings? Is it your father or mother that rules the fae realm? How mad is she going to be on a scale of one to ten about you being kidnapped by us?”

“I thought this was a one-question, one-answer kind of a game.” I stay silent and he grins. “Fine. My mother won’t be mad because she’s dead. My father murdered her not long after I was born.”

A flicker of pain flashes in his eyes; it’s gone as quickly as it appeared.

“I’m sorry,” I reply quickly.

He shrugs. “The fae royalty is complicated. It’s more trouble than it’s worth, but don’t feel sorry for me. I’m not innocent either.”

I feel like we have lost the point of the game but it’s good that he’s talking.

“Wolves and fae have been enemies for years,” I say. “Centuries have gone past since we ever did anything but kill each other. We worship similar gods and—”

“We do not worship the same gods as you,” Rueven counters.

I frown at that. “What gods do you worship? We only know that the moon and the star gods exist. What other gods are there?”

He doesn't answer and I get the feeling he isn't going to tell me anymore. I would've thought his mother's murder would be more of a touchy subject than the gods.

“What would it take for you to tell me about your god?” I press him.

Rueven stretches out on the floor. “I'd love some good fucking wine right about now.”

I wince. “I didn't find any alcohol in the alpha's rooms before I came here, but I'll get some. I can search the kitchen at night, and maybe I'll bring you some tomorrow if I get lucky. Elias won't always be around and I'll come when I can without him seeing.”

Straightening up, I brush off some of the dirt off my clothes. Rueven is watching me, almost curiously. “Why?”

“Elias might have decided to starve you, but I've decided I'm not going to let that happen. I've watched too many people die from an empty belly and their suffering still haunts me to this day.” I cross to the passageway, pausing at the stairs to look back at him. “This world was made to punish the weak, but if just one of us is kind to an enemy, then maybe it'll start to change.”

His curiosity twists into disgust. “The world doesn't change, Mercy. It will always be this way.” His voice is bitter just like the time he told me to never forget his name. “And you still owe me a debt.”

I climb the stairs without looking back at him. “I'm well aware of that, fae.”

He's wrong about the world. He *has* to be. Or else... what is there to hope for? Hope is what got me through the darkest times of my life. It gave me a reason to keep going, to keep fighting. I can only hope in this case that what I said to Rueven turns out to be true.

Maybe if we were all a little less vicious to each other, then the world can finally start to change.

I climb the stairs out of the dungeon and go through the empty kitchen, hearing a raven squawk from outside. A chill runs down my spine as I walk into the gardens, right to where the big raven is sitting on a branch peering down at me. Except, it's no raven. It's fae. The same one from before, no doubt.

"Such dark hair you have, wolf. It's almost like you were born of the night sky."

I freeze at the sound of a woman's voice speaking in my mind. I've never heard another being in my head, not even from a wolf. The raven's beak doesn't move when she speaks. She squawks again, almost like she's laughing at me.

"Speechless, Verena?"

I cross my arms, looking around me, but I'm very much alone. "How do you know my name?"

The raven crunches the branch with its talons. *"I know many things, such as just now when you fed my brother. That was very kind of you,"* she says, her voice taking on a slightly haughty edge to it as she shakes her wings and puffs out her little chest, lifting her head higher. *"I have come to free my brother from this disgusting cesspit these filthy mutts call their home, but I need your help."*

I eye her suspiciously, my hackles rising at the insult. "Oh, and what help would that be?"

The raven suddenly jumps from the branch, flying to another before answering me, her eyes glowing again. *"His necklace. He can't use it down there, but I could use it up here to free him of those iron chains. Bring me the necklace and I'll*

take my brother home, and we will leave. No one will get hurt."

My heart slams at the idea of Rueven just disappearing from my life. It's a crazy thought, we barely know each other. But I don't trust this woman and that isn't going to change anytime soon. She hasn't even shown me her real face, just this raven side of her, and every instinct screams for me to leave.

"Why don't you ask him for the necklace? Surely he'd trust his sister more than he'd trust me?"

The raven shakes her wings again, and I can tell she's getting frustrated. "Because my brother and I have not been on the best of terms lately." She hops onto the branch nearest to me. "For whatever reason, he seems to trust you, so much so, that I bet he'd be willing to give you his most treasured possession. The necklace is the only way I can get him out of here safely."

I'm still not convinced. Something about her is just... off.

"The Vaega pack is giving him a trial and it'll be fair. I'll be there to make sure of it."

The raven squawks loudly and her eyes gleam like bleeding moonlight. I can almost taste magic in the air, and I realise I'll be in trouble if she attacks me since I'm alone out here with no weapon. I should never have engaged with her—regardless if she turns out to be Rueven's sister.

"Stupid girl, you know they will kill him—"

"Verena! Are you lost?" Elias shouts from nearby and the raven pauses. I swear a little fear flashes in her eyes and she looks at me once more, nothing but annoyance in her gaze. Then she jumps into the air and flies off into the night sky before Elias finds me.

I watch her fly away, getting the feeling that won't be the last time I see her. We have her brother, after all, and we both know these wolves are never going to let him go free.

CHAPTER
EIGHT



“Are you ready?” Elias leans on the doorframe, his thick arms crossed over his broad chest. He takes up nearly the entire width and his giant size sends heat coursing through my body. Damn it! I can’t deny he’s a very attractive wolf and knowing he wants me the way he says he does brings out a desire within me I’ve never known.

A desire that makes me want to throw myself into his arms every time I see him.

I have to shake myself out of it and stand. Elias glances briefly at my clothes. Simple black leggings and an oversized black top that I found in one of his drawers. Someone left out a bunch of thin dresses and thicker coats, and all of it made me think of how much Kris would love this place. I couldn’t pick up any of it. My hand drifts to my necklace and I touch the stone for comfort.

“I like what you’re wearing. Remind me to destroy all the clothes I got for you, so you just wear mine.” He steps back out. I definitely won’t be reminding him to do that. There would be so much waste. “Come on. Dinner will get cold and Alma will get pissed. You don’t know her that well yet, but you don’t want to be late for dinner.”

Elias holds the door open for me, and I follow him out into the courtyard where we go around several gigantic trees and sweet-smelling flower patches to where there’s a circle of leather chairs around a lit stone firepit under a pagoda. The fire crackles as the people in the seats all turn to look at me.

Two of them I know. Lordin and Axis, who flash me friendly smiles. They are familiar to me, but the other three I've never seen. I remember Elias saying he had five betas. I guess they all are here.

One of them looks like he's a mountain. It's the easiest way I can think of him. He's a giant, bigger than any male I've seen, but somehow his bald head is quite tiny compared to the rest of his massively built body. He also looks shorter than Elias. Even so, I imagine, he would be like a rock if he slammed into you. He fills the chair, squishing it as he sits in thick his leathers. The other two are females which surprises me. I can tell they're betas, the smell of it, but I've never seen a female beta.

The tallest of them has completely shaven hair and several piercings in her left eyebrow. Her skin is dark and beautiful, and her eyes are the palest blue I've ever seen. She stares at me and inclines her head in respect. The female next to her is nearly her complete opposite. Long blonde hair falls in braids on her pale shoulders, and despite being slim, I can tell that she's strong.

She's stunning in the way some wolves are, but somehow she is more. One of her legs crosses over the other and a long slit up her silk red dress shows off tattoos of arrows that disappear under material. This female is the only one not in leathers other than me. Her smile to me isn't as friendly or respectful.

Elias clears his throat. "You know Lordin and Alix. This is Nymeria." He nods curtly to the blonde, "and Morana at her side. Sisters that you wouldn't want to meet in battle, wolves or not."

The mountain man coughs and Elias sighs. "I was getting to you. This here is Warven. He doesn't talk and hasn't been able to since birth. Yet somehow he can tell you to fuck off with one look." Elias picks up my hand and I blink, trying to remember all the names. "Everyone, this is my fated mate. Verena. She is an Omega, and she is my family now like each one of you. I know you will protect her life as you do my own."

I take the seat he offers me. Just as I sit, Alma comes out with plates for us all, then kisses Lordin on his cheek and leaves. There's an awkward silence for a moment before Alix jokingly groans. "It's never this quiet in our group. We need beer or wine." His eyes widen at mine. "For the love of gods, please say that you drink, Verena."

"Wine is a good idea," I murmur, taking note to keep some for Rueven. "Please carry on. Pretend I'm not here."

Elias leans closer. "That is a very hard thing for me to do."

Morana catches my eye. "Has his flirting been this bad on the whole trip here?"

"Worse," Alix playfully replies. "Our alpha used the classic pickup line that he'd take her into the mountains and show her the magical caverns." He mimics Elias's voice, and they all burst into laughter. I can't help but smile at them while Elias watches them fondly. He does, however, glare at Alix and Lordin clears his throat.

"Says the wolf who is fixated on a female who hates him. How many times has she turned you down now? It's horrific every time that you go over there and we have to watch that flirting."

Alix winks at me. "Neoma doesn't hate me. One day, she'll realise we are perfect for each other."

"Who is Neoma?" Everyone groans at my question.

I understand why when Alix's eyes light up. "Oh, she's gorgeous and smart. I've known her since we were kids. She is the only female in the pack with bright pink, curly hair and huuuuge—"

"Quite enough of that," Morana cuts in, rolling her eyes. "Don't forget to mention the time she punched you in the face for being annoying." The others chuckle, even Elias. "Man, I've told you she is never going to date you. Let alone be your mate."

"Her violence to me just makes me love her more," he says with a grin "I like them fiery."

I shake my head at him. He's more insane than I thought he was. For a second, I almost feel comfortable until Nymeria meets my eyes. She sniffs the air as if picking up an unpleasant scent.

"You look weak."

The laughter dies away and an uncomfortable silence drifts over everyone. I stare back at Nymeria despite the urge to remove myself from the awkward situation. Or hit her.

Luckily, Morana slaps her on the arm for me. "Don't mind her. She's serious about everything, but she means well."

Nymeria's gaze strays to Elias who's looking at her with mild annoyance. There's something in my chest that burns with the way she looks at him like some lovestruck teenager. It *really* makes me want to hit her and move closer to Elias. To my relief, he doesn't look happy with her at all, but he still lives with this female. I get a sinking feeling they were more than just beta and alpha at one point, and that Nymeria isn't completely over it.

Mate. The word nags at me, my wolf telling me to snarl it at her. *He's my mate. Back off.*

What the fuck is going on with me? Did I really just refer to Elias as my mate?

Her dark eyes fall on me once again, the coldness in them making it clear I'm unwanted here. I didn't expect everyone to welcome me with open arms, but something about this woman makes my hackles rise. I return her gaze just as coldly, refusing to let her see that she's getting to me.

"I could train her for you," she says, finally breaking the awkward silence. "For the sake of the pack. We cannot have a weak alpha female, omega or not."

Morana gives me a quick once over and then frowns at her sister. "You haven't even asked her if she'll need training."

Nymeria sighs. "Fine." She cocks her head to the side. "Have you had much training in that shithole of a pack you came from?"

“I hunted for them. Well, I used to hunt for them.” It’s not quite a lie—I definitely used to hunt in the alpha’s woods. I just wasn’t allowed to, and whatever I caught I had to take home in secret. “I’m good with a bow,” I add, not mentioning the fact I have an impressive aim thanks to Mera’s training. But even Mera was shocked by how far I could reach my target. My eyesight has always been one of my best gifts and I know it’s not average. Along with the new powers I seem to have, I need more answers from Rueven.

Because none of this is just an Omega thing.

Omegas aren’t meant to have powers—only our offspring do. That’s what everyone always told me anyway, and I never found or heard anything to suggest otherwise.

“I’ve had a little training with daggers and some sword work,” I finish off.

“And your wolf?” Nymeria demands. “What’s she like in battle?”

Damn it, she had to ask. “She’s...shy.”

Elias finally speaks but he doesn’t offer his help. “I haven’t seen my mate shift yet. What colour is your wolf?”

“White.” The word tumbles out of my mouth before I can catch it.

Okay. So that was totally a lie. Damn it. I really should’ve thought about all my answers a long time ago. Thank the gods I didn’t answer something stupid like pink or yellow.

Nymeria continues to study me with narrowed eyes. “Hmm. That would make sense with your pack. Were you born there? What happened to your parents?”

I feel like there’s a thousand questions being thrown my way, but Elias doesn’t stop them. They are his family; I get that. But I don’t know them yet. I clear my throat, remembering what Mera once said to me about lying. The best way to lie is to make it as close to the truth as possible to make it believable. So I do just that.

“I was brought up with the humans, unaware of what I was until I was older. They didn’t know either because once they found out I was a wolf, they sold me to my alpha, along with ten other female wolves. They were struggling with females in the pack and the alpha knew we could help grow it again.”

Elias growls at my words. “The gods’ punishment.”

I nod and continue. “When I got to the pack, my foster mother, Mera, took me in. She said I was the only girl kicking, screaming, and fighting my fate. I was fighting so much that she couldn’t just walk by.”

Her words come back to me. How she called me pure fire from that day on. “So she adopted me. She even paid the alpha for me. He didn’t mind as long as the other girls were kept in the pack for breeding later on. Seven of them starved on the streets for how little he gave a shit about them. I was lucky. Mera taught me to hunt. She cared for me. Eventually she took in my sister, not my biological sister, but my sister, nonetheless...”

I look down and Elias touches my arm. “Her sister was killed in a sacrifice to the gods before we got there.”

Morana’s voice is full of sorrow. “I’m sorry.”

I lift my head. “Yes, she was sacrificed to the gods in the hopes her life would somehow save his pack and teach me a lesson in respect. I was supposed to be mated to his son, but he wanted me to submit to him in the end. I didn’t.”

Kris’s face enters my mind, and for once, she isn’t dying on the altar. She’s smiling and dancing in the kitchen while cooking her famous rabbit stew. “She was amazing, you know. She would’ve loved it here.”

A growl rumbles in each of the males’ throats. It’s Alix who speaks next.

“What was your sister’s name?”

“Kristalis,” I say. “We called her Kris.”

He nods. “We will remember her and make a shrine for her in our woods to honour her memory. If you would like that?”

He glances at Elias, who nods his approval.

My voice comes out quiet, touched by their kindness. “I’d like that very much. Thank you.”

Maybe when I visit the shrine, I’ll finally let myself grieve for her.

Elias takes my hand as if sensing my pain. “I want you to be aware we do not do that here. We have laws on murder, on many terrible fates, but our justice is decided in trials. No one dies for the gods anymore. They created us. They don’t need our deaths to please them, only our peace.”

Morana huffs. “I wasn’t aware any pack did those anymore. They are barbaric and fruitless.”

“I did not know he was doing them or else I would’ve come sooner to stop him,” Elias admits. “I should’ve trusted my gut rather than trusting his betas. They had us all fooled that the pack was thriving with all the food and supplies we sent each week.”

Elias is good, and from what I’ve seen of his pack, his closest friends, I don’t think he’d do that to me or his people. I can trust him...but how do I do that after everything that’s happened?

We all finish our food with small chatter, and I marvel at how incredible it tastes. I remind myself that I will have to sneak into the kitchen tonight and take some down for Rueven. Eventually they speak amongst themselves, talking about various wolves around the pack, people I don’t know but strangely I’m excited to meet.

Elias rises. “I want to show you something. Will you come with me before bed?”

Alix laughs. “Don’t go with him. This is his terrible flirting tactics again. Don’t go into the cave.”

“I swear to the stars, I’m going to throw you into the sea if you keep talking,” Elias barks. Alix grins at him and I can’t help but laugh. Elias blinks down at me like my laugh sounds wonderful to him. “In fact, I might keep Alix around if he makes you laugh like that.”

“Always happy to help,” Alix stands and dramatically bows.

I stand and take Elias’s hand, letting him lead me down the bath. I look back once, my smile fading when I see Nymeria staring at Elias’s hand holding mine. A look that tells me everything about how she is feeling. We’re going to have a big problem, me and her. A huge problem if she keeps looking at my mate like that.

I grip Elias’s hand, an unexpected possessiveness coming over me. Stars above, did I really just think of him like that again? What is going on with me?

I stay quiet as he leads me through the courtyard into the house with a large open lounge.

“These are our shared areas.” He points at a door. “That’s my study. I’m usually there if you can’t find me.” He then points to all the other doors and archways. “Through there are the kitchens.” I don’t tell him I already know that one because I stole food and gave it to the fae. I also know where the dungeons are too. “In that room over there is a game table and beyond that the library. Outside the courtyard is a training area. Another place you can find me.”

“Oh, sounds nice,” I tell him with a smile before looking around at the comfortable room.

It’s so informal for an alpha’s home which is not what I expected.

It’s an actual *home*, a place where wolves live peacefully instead of in fear. Alferis only ever let people into his home to show off his superiority and remind everyone that he was the alpha. They lived on eggshells around him, even his own son at times.

I stop near the door leading outside to the back of the house. I need to ask the burning question in my mind to know where I stand. Elias looks down at me. “Nymeria. I got the feeling you and her are together?”

“Were, and only briefly, before she became my beta. We were teenagers and it meant nothing to either of us. She’s had

many lovers since, and you don't need to worry about her." He leans closer. "For the record, you never have to worry about anyone. The only female I've ever wanted is my mate. I'll always be loyal to you. I have been the entire time we've known each other and I'll continue to be until my death."

Alix was wrong. Elias is very good at flirting. Stars above, my legs feel weak. Although I disagree on Nymeria and how he thinks she's over it. My wolf knew the moment she looked at him; she's far from over him. I've never felt possessive over someone. The feeling has calmed now, thank the stars, but it's still there—still burning in my chest.

"How many other ex-lovers should I worry about bumping into?" I ask him.

"Only a few," he answers honestly, surprising me a little. I guess I'm not used to males being honest, especially alphas. "Every single one of them I regret now I know that fated mates are back in the world." He pauses, his eyebrows drawing together with frustration. "If I knew you truly existed, I would never have—"

"Elias, you can't be held guilty for not knowing about my existence." I offer him a small, reassuring smile. "So don't worry about that. And, hey, I'm not a virgin either."

He growls at that before he leads me out the door and to the rock cliffs at the edge of the pack land. They overlook the green sea that dazzles back at us. He sits in the grass and I sit at his side watching over the sun and enjoying the ocean breeze. The entire sky is full of stars, and the moon is far brighter than I've ever seen it. It points at one star to our left. It's the brightest in the sky.

"That's Vaegall—the star god our pack is named after. I don't know if you're aware of this, but when you become an alpha, when you swear in with the sacred words, the star gods visit you. They did that for me. It's incredible, really, because no matter where I look in the sky, I always see it. It's always been my home, my north point, until recently." He looks at me for a long time. "Now I have a new home."

I lean my head on his shoulder, my heart banging against its cage, desperate to let him in.

It seems I could have a new home here too... if only I wasn't afraid of losing it again.

CHAPTER
NINE



Running my fingers over the rows of beautiful dresses, I struggle to figure out which one I like the most. They're all so very beautiful, nothing like the clothes I've worn most of my life. It's been two weeks since I arrived at the Vaega pack, and despite the wounds still healing in my heart, I've grown to love being here and spending time with their alpha.

Every day, Elias whisks me off to exciting new places and introduces me to a variety of people in his pack, who are only ever kind and welcoming to me. He always has me smiling by the end, even on the rare occasion I tried not to smile just to see his reaction. He ended up making me laugh so hard I could barely breathe. It's like he's slowly chipping away at the walls I've built around myself, and whenever he looks at me like I'm his world, his everything, a piece of it crumbles away to let him into my heart.

My evenings are spent with the tricky but gorgeous fae who tells me nothing of importance while he eats the food I bring him. Sometimes he doesn't talk at all, and after a whole day socialising in Elias's pack, I welcome the silence. It's nice to just sit beside him, the two of us watching the night sky pass over the dungeon window, and I think he enjoys my company too.

I turn my attention back to the rows of dresses. I've never had a selection of clothes to choose from, especially ones as expensive as this. Each of the dresses is made with such

intricate and beautiful detail that it would be a crime for no one to ever wear them.

The sunlight shines on the only red dress at the end of the row and I find myself drifting toward it. A female wolf clears her throat, shuffling her feet, and I almost wonder if she is nervous that I won't like them. She clearly made them. I would've known it even if she hadn't watched my every reaction to her dresses. She watches so closely, making me nervous, her eyes fixed on my back as I touch each one of the dresses. There're so many different colours, it's like a rainbow in here.

Kris would have loved this. She would have complimented each dress, tried them all on, and told the woman how amazing her designs were a hundred times over by this point. Sadness floods through me in a wave.

“My sister would have loved these dresses,” I say.

I don't know why I'm telling a stranger that. The words just leave my mouth.

“There has been gossip that you tragically lost your sister before coming here.” She pauses. “Omega Verena, it's lovely that you believe she would have admired my designs. It would have been an honour for me to have made a dress for her.”

I blow out a breath as I stop, my fingers touching the dress that is blood red. It reminds me of her blood—of my revenge. It's perfect. I pull the dress off the hanger and hold it out in front of me. It's wired tight around the bodice before flowing out into a longer skirt that ripples with deep red silk. There's a massive slit up the side that will make it easy to walk in. Moving over to the full-length mirror, I hold it up against myself and the woman steps forward to my side. “Omega—”

I interrupt her. “Please call me Verena. I might be an Omega, but not to my friends. What's your name?”

Her cheeks brighten. “Layla. I own a small boutique and you are always welcome. I'm cousins with Lordin. He's the alpha's second beta. I believe you met him?” I nod, just now noticing their resemblance—the same curly red hair and

endearing freckled cheeks. “Verena, I hoped you would pick this one. I was asked to bring a selection of dresses in your size. I’d seen you once walking through the pack on your first day here, so I had a vague idea of your measurements. This dress...” She nods to it. “I dreamed of the design a few months ago and woke up in a creative flutter. I just *had* to make it. I believe I saw you dancing in it. The stars themselves deem red is your colour.”

They certainly have shown me enough blood to make me believe that.

“I can make any adjustments here and now, so you are ready for the ball. I’ve been up for three days straight making the rest of the dresses for you, if you wish to try them on. They are all yours.”

My eyes widen. There must be thirty ball gowns here. “Layla, you shouldn’t have.” She looks away, tucking her brown hair behind her ears. I don’t want to make her feel uncomfortable. “But this dress—it’s stunning. Absolutely stunning. I don’t think I’ve ever worn red before.”

For a moment, the red reminds me of another dress, one I refused to wear. I know wearing Alferis’s dress wouldn’t have stopped the sacrifice of Kris. He was always going to kill her to punish me. I stare at the dress, remembering how much Kris loved the colour and always said it was my shade. I’m wearing this dress for her. I’m going to wear all these at some point in memory of the young girl who loved to swirl around in her dresses.

Layla’s eyes brighten. “It will go well with your dark hair and your complexion. I’m very proud you are going to be wearing one of my dresses. May I suggest some red lipstick to complement the dress?”

I grin. “I like that idea, Layla.”

I strip down to my underwear while Layla finds the lipstick. After applying my makeup, she helps me into the dress and begins to tighten the many strings of corset on my back until it fits perfectly. No alterations needed. The fact that

she made this dress to my size just from seeing me once walking through the pack is astonishing. She's so talented.

"You're amazing, Layla. Thank you so much. This dress makes me a little less worried about facing the alpha tonight."

She bows her head. "It is an honour to serve you, Verena. May I say that you will make an excellent alpha female for our pack? I'm so thrilled the gods have blessed our pack with you. Omega! The blessed gods have been so kind to us. Alpha Elias was alone, and we are happy to see him find his fated mate. It gives all of us hope that fated mates are coming back into the world."

My heart swells as I smile softly at her and look back at the dress. Fated mates, the fairy tale. How can it be real? I didn't know Omegas were real until I was sixteen, and yet here I am. I smooth a loose strand of hair back into my fancy bun, admiring the braid crown that holds up my hair. My stomach clenches. Mera taught me how to braid. My hair looked like a bird's nest before she took me under her wing.

Stars above, I miss her. I miss them both so, so much it hurts to even think about them.

I shake my head and focus on getting ready. The last thing I add to complete my look is Kris's necklace. The black crystal floats just above my breasts, nestled beneath the valley of my throat. Layla peers at it with a curious look on her face.

"It's a very pretty necklace, Verena, but I have some ruby necklaces, if you'd prefer?"

I touch the necklace. "No, it's okay. This... this was my sister's, and I need her courage with me tonight."

"I understand."

She doesn't comment further on the necklace, and I'm thankful for it. She resumes lacing the corset, and a few moments later, I straighten my shoulders and look in the mirror. I don't even recognize myself. Gone is the skinny, dirty, messy girl that lived in the forest hunting.

Now I look like a wolf who could claim to be an omega. The makeup and dress make me seem older, highlighting my

best features. Something prickles at the back of my neck like an awareness of some kind, and I don't need to look to know that he's near. My entire body senses him before he arrives.

Elias knocks on the door once before opening it and stepping in. I watch his reflection in the mirror as he walks into the room, doing up the button on his wrist, his eyes fixed on me. Holy stars. He looks... really fucking hot. His dark, forest-green shirt sculps his body, hugging every muscle perfectly, and the buttons undone at the top reveal hints of smooth skin underneath. The dark green is the colour of his pack—of the banners I saw in the streets. His shirt is tucked tightly into his black trousers and the light bounces off his shiny leather shoes with each step. He runs a hand through his slicked-back hair and curves the edge of his lips.

My heart skips a beat and I wrestle the urge to smile back at him. As if only just becoming aware of the rest of my body, he freezes when he takes in my outfit, and his eyes widen.

“Fuckkk me.”

At this point, if he wasn't an alpha and wanted me as his mate, I'd happily say yes to that offer. Instead I just roll my eyes at him, though a small smile wins its way over my lips.

Elias slowly runs his eyes up and down my body, taking me in. He only blinks when Layla clears her throat, and then he turns to her. “I must thank you for allowing my mate's beauty to rival the moon itself.”

My heart skips a beat, but I let out a sigh. “Elias, I am not your mate.”

He grins at me, but there's tension showing in the lines around his eyes.

Something is bothering him.

Layla clears her throat again when Elias and I have been staring at each other for a few seconds too long. “I just need to finish her laces and then—”

“I'll finish them. Have a good night, Layla.” Elias walks over to me, taking over from the seamstress, who mumbles her good-byes before leaving us alone.

I glance back at myself in the mirror, unable to look at him as he puts his hands on my shoulders. “The laces aren’t up there.”

His laugh vibrates through my entire body. “I’m aware, smartass.” He’s so much taller than me that his hands rest perfectly on my shoulders, and if I just lean my head back, I’d rest on his chest. We look good together in the mirror, but I won’t allow myself to relax into him, even if my body screams that I should. My heart shouts that he can be trusted, that maybe he is my mate and meant for me, that maybe some of this is real.

Maybe it’s not all going to slip through my fingers like everything else has in my life.

But my mind hardens such thoughts and reminds my heart that only bad things happen when you open it up for love. It’s never worked for me before so why would it now?

Elias moves those massive hands of his down to my waist, gently running his fingers down my ribs. His touch sends burning heat across my body, and I suck in a deep breath. He takes his sweet time pulling the corset tight and twisting and tying knots at the bottom before meeting my gaze in the mirror. He doesn’t move or say anything.

“What’s wrong?” I ask after a moment.

Elias hums, moving a little closer, and touches my neck. “What I wouldn’t do to kiss you right here.” He runs his fingers down the side of my neck, and I find myself arching to the side for him. A low growl vibrates out of his throat at the offer, and he steps closer, his whole body pressing against my back until there is no space between us. I make a foolish, stupid move and lean back into him, letting my body rule my decisions, even though I know I shouldn’t do this.

This *can’t* be real.

He leans down, pressing his soft lips to my neck, and everything burns through me from that kiss alone. His hands skim over my collarbone, around my breasts, and he gently teases my hardened nipples. Pleasure spreads through me,

demanding more, channelling a release. Elias takes a sharp breath.

“Verena.”

His growl echoes as he wraps his other hand around my throat, holding me to him, deepening the kiss on my neck right before he bites me. I gasp, sinking into him, unable to move as the sharp pain mixes with unbelievable pleasure. Pleasure that spreads through my body until I’m close to begging for him to do more than bite me. The bite doesn’t last long before he breaks away from me and steps back. He frowns at me in the mirror. “Fuck! I’m sorry. I lost control for a moment there, and my wolf... He really wants to claim you.”

Trying my best to pull myself together, to not let him see how much he affected me, I snap at him, “Well, this certainly shows I’m his then, doesn’t it? Ugh. Thanks for that.”

I brush my fingers over the bite on my neck. It’s sore, bleeding slightly, and everyone is going to see it at the ball. Elias can’t hide the pride in his eyes when he looks at the bite. Possessive alpha assholes. I’ve really got to get some new friends, or else I’m going to be covered in these bites if Elias has his way.

He rubs the back of his neck when he finally notices I’m mad at him. “Sometimes it’s hard to control that urge from your wolf. You must know.”

No, I don’t. I don’t shift.

I don’t tell him that, though, as he might reject me, and though I don’t want to admit it, right now I need him.

I know it’s just a matter of time before he realises I can’t shift, not that I just don’t want to shift in front of him. He likely thinks I’m worried my wolf might like her new alpha mate and want to claim him too. Shame she doesn’t exist and never has.

I’m a broken Omega.

A worthless No-Shift in the eyes of some wolves.

Elias picks up a tissue from the dresser and gently wipes my neck until there is no blood. My body tingles from his touch. I clear my throat.

“So, are you going to tell me what’s bothering you, or bite me again to distract us both?”

He sits on the edge of the chair arm, stretching out his long legs. “There is an alpha coming tonight that I didn’t expect would reply to my request, let alone come. He hasn’t replied to any wolves I’ve sent in the past to discuss alliances so he isn’t here for me.”

I frown. “He makes you nervous?”

Elias runs his eyes over me like he could eat me up and it’s very, very difficult to focus on what he’s saying while he’s looking at me like that. “The Arcturus pack is the only one as big as my own, but they are different from us. The alpha is known for being brutal, uncontrollable, and unpredictable. They worship the half-moon goddess and hold fights almost daily in her honour. The others I can predict. I know them well enough to know what pisses them off and how to make sure there is peace between us. My father took me to all their packs as a child, and I grew up knowing the alpha’s well. Even if I don’t like them, I know them. But not this one.”

“Even if he is crazy, he would be insane to attack you here,” I say, sensing his unease.

His eyes meet mine. “My concern isn’t for me. It’s for you. I suspect that they’re going to try to steal you from me. I know damn well they’re going to offer you sweet nothings, promises of riches, and stars know what the fuck else. You’ll have your pick of the world, Verena, and the world is about to know you well.”

He’s worried I’ll leave him. That must be why he marked me. I want to tell him I’m not going anywhere, but once I say that out loud, everything changes.

Elias looks away from me and straightens. “I might not know their weaknesses, but I will attempt to make an alliance with them. The fae are stirring, and this recent attack is

something all of us must discuss.” He offers me his hand. “Are you ready to go, Verena?”

Taking his hand, I let him lead the way to the door. His grip is a little tight as if he’s frightened I’ll be snatched from his grasp at any second. He needs me to hold his hand, I realise, and a part of me wants to give him that. A part I don’t quite understand.

“I’m nervous,” I let out, my voice a whisper. “What if they all hate me?”

What if they figure out I shattered the crystals and took down their defences causing an entire pack to be attacked and most of it destroyed? I’m a danger to them all, and once Elias realises this, he won’t want me here. Mate or not, I’m a threat to his pack.

There’s a carriage waiting outside the courtyard, and Elias pauses at the gilded door, looking down at me.

“If they hate you, then they will have me to deal with.” His voice is laced with venom, then it softens as he raises my hand. He gently brushes his fingers over my knuckles in a gentle caress, his eyes never leaving my own. “You do not stand alone anymore. I will be the shadow at your side, Verena, unless you demand I leave.”

I shake my head at him, my heart pounding with the promise of his words. I want to say that shadows never leave—that it’s impossible for them to exist in the absence of light. They both need each other to endure. But saying that would be admitting the truth about something I’m not ready to admit yet: that deep down, I want nothing more than to dance with his shadows.

I bite my lip and climb into the carriage. Elias sits across from me. It takes about half an hour to get up the mountain. The carriage draws toward a mansion that sits at the base of a cliff. Wolf-shaped pillars line the building and walkway. Enormous flames burn atop them, making me feel tiny, like a mere speck in this realm. Dark shadows fall over the carriage as we come to a halt, and the sound of laughter, chatter, and wolves howling echoes in the night air.

The smell of fire from the lanterns reminds me of home as Elias opens the door and climbs out, waiting for me. I gather the bottom of my dress in my hands and step out, my heels clicking on the stone as I stand. Many of the wolves climbing out of their own carriages openly stop to stare at me, and I notice there is a tunnel cave in the mountain where most of the carriages seem to be coming from.

Elias follows my gaze. “The tunnels lead outside the pack and it is the only way for invited guests to enter,” he explains. “It was designed by my grandfather so visitors do not get to search our lands when they come here. They can only gaze upon it from up here. It keeps the pack safe.”

“Smart,” I say, my mouth drying from nerves.

Elias rests his hand on the small of my back as he guides me up a dozen steps, passing by so many wolves who watch me. The main entrance hall is surprisingly small and filled with dozens of people who make way for us as we walk through.

When we enter the ballroom, my breath hitches at the sheer vastness of the space. Tall ceilings, arched windows, and massive glass doors that lead to balconies fill the space. In each corner of the room, gorgeous blossom trees stretch toward the vaulted ceiling and the small crystal chimes hanging on each of the branches glimmer like stars in the night sky.

The most breathtaking part is where the branches have gathered into the middle of the ceiling. They stretch around a moon-shaped chandelier filled with thousands of tiny little crystals that reflect light across the room. The gold walls match the marble flooring people dance on to the slow music played by an orchestra. On the other side is a long stone banquet table with seven gold throne-like chairs and an iron wolf statue at each end.

Two people step up to us, bowing low. One is an alpha in a white suit, whose dark skin is covered in unusual gold tattoos, and the other is a tiny woman with long braided black hair and dazzling silver eyes. I stare at her for too long, missing both of

them introducing themselves, because she feels... familiar. As if I've met her before.

When I realise I missed their introductions, I blink at them, my cheeks heating. "Sorry, what was that?"

They both smile warmly, and Elias looks down at me. "This is Alpha Kyler and his wife, Asterin, from the Rigel pack. They wish to meet you."

I can tell from Elias's tone alone that he likes these two. I return their warm smile. "I'm Verena. Nice to meet you."

Asterin bows her head. "If you need a friend who understands being married to an alpha wolf, or mated in your case, please call for me. Our pack is only a short distance away and I regularly visit here as my family is from this pack."

"Asterin was born here and met Alpha Kyler on one of his many visits," Elias explains to me and turns to the silent alpha with a friendly smile. "I still believe he stole one of my best wolves."

Kyler bows his head, his eyes flashing playfully to his mate. "I met my fate here on the star and moon's path."

Asterin nudges his shoulder with hers, and he looks down at her with a loving gaze I've seen on Elias's face whenever he looks at me. It makes my heart jump. "Kyler is a cryptic wolf," she says with a smile, then turns to me. "We will leave you be, but please find me in the crowds if you wish, Verena. And try our wine. It's delicious!"

As they depart, Elias leads me straight through the rest of the crowds, who all come to speak to him and openly stare at me. It's strange to be stared at this much, but not everyone is as hostile as I expected them to be. Their gazes aren't scornful or disgusted either. They're more amazed than anything. They wouldn't be if they really knew me and what I am.

We manage to cut a path through them and at long last reach the banquet. The entire table overflows with food, expensive cutlery, and very breakable-looking vases with dark purple flowers spreading out of them. My stomach twists a

little. These feasts remind me of the night Kris died. It's with tremendous effort I force myself not to think about that and instead allow Elias to escort me around the table.

Three of the seats now have alphas sitting in them, but my attention is fixed on the alpha in the middle one. He's massive, taking up the entire space of the seat, and he looks like he can't be bothered with any of this as he cuts an apple with his dagger. But he doesn't look at it as the blade cuts effortlessly through. His eyes are fixed on me. Two iron swords glisten from his back and he's definitely missed the memo about what to wear tonight. He looks like he's ready for a day of hunting, judging by his tough, thick, worn leathers that cover him from his neck down. His outfit has so many buttons and little hiding places that no doubt have weapons hidden in them.

I catch a glimpse of a silver something around his neck as I pull my eyes back up to his handsome face. He watches me keenly and I watch him right back, never lowering my head and submitting to him. A slow smirk works its way over his lips. I can tell straight away this is the Arcturus Alpha Elias was worried about. His very presence is cold and intimidating.

He drops the apple on the table, knife still stuck in it, and leans back on his seat, slamming his muddy boots onto the clean gold tablecloth with a thud. Elias stiffens at my side. This new alpha doesn't give one fuck. Elias finally moves with a low growl of annoyance, and he sits in the seat next to the mud-covered alpha.

Before I can even ask where I'm meant to sit, I find myself moving to Elias and plopping myself onto his lap as though that's what I've always done. He looks at me with thinly veiled surprise flashing over his countenance. I don't think he expected me to sit on his lap either. But for some reason, with so many other alphas in the room watching me, being close to Elias helps me feel safe.

I wrap my arm around his neck, and he rests a hand on my thigh, his attention rooted on the new alpha. "Welcome, Alpha Lazuri. I did not expect you to accept my invitation."

Lazuri runs his finger over his bottom lip, and I follow the movement with my eyes, my heartbeat weirdly increasing. Damn, the Arcturus alpha is really handsome. Everything about him is rugged, from his long dark hair held up in a messy bun at the back of his head, to the many tattoos covering his olive skin and the silver eyes that have specks of blue in them.

“I imagine you were, Elias. But alas I came. You best not be fucking with me now.”

Elias keeps his tone neutral, but I can tell by his muscles flexing against me he’s irritated. “My warnings were correct. We will discuss them more after we eat.” He glances down at the dirty boots. “If you decide to remove your boots from my table, that is.”

Lazuri’s lips twitch and he slowly pulls his boots off the table in a way that deliberately knocks several plates and glasses onto the floor. “Food can wait. I want to dance with the new Omega.”

“*No.*”

Elias’s growl makes me jump.

I clear my throat as I feel violence spreading through the air between these two very powerful alphas. I do not want to be a squished omega between them. I press my hand on Elias’s cheek, turning his head so he is looking at me, “Surely I can choose who I want to dance with myself?” I glance between the two most powerful men in this world. “One dance won’t hurt, Elias. I’m not going anywhere, *my shadow.*”

Damn, I’ve said it now. Elias’s eyes light up like I’ve made his night. *He actually cares about you*, my heart whispers, *so why won’t you just let him?*

Lazuri stands and offers me a heavily tattooed, ringed hand, clearly knowing I’ve swayed Elias. I have a feeling Lazuri wasn’t going to take no for an answer. I slide off Elias’s lap, and his fingers graze my waist as I leave him to take another alpha’s hand. “Zuri. Or Laz. Whatever you wish to call me, I will enjoy the sound immensely.”

I stare at the back of his head as he drags me onto the dance floor. His flirting must be to piss Elias off. No one stops us this time. “*Lazuri* is a nice name,” I reply pointedly, refusing to admit this rude alpha could ever get me bothered.

He pulls me tightly against his body, leaving no space between us, his hand so powerful against my lower back that his heat spreads through me. Part of me wonders what it would be like to have all of him—this massive, powerful body—draped over my own. Sex has always been shitty for me, the few wolves I’ve been with, that is. It was always quick like they were scared someone would find out they were fucking a no-shift omega, and I soon found out I had better luck on my own. But the way Elias kissed me earlier... how it feels right now in this stranger’s arms...

I wonder if I’ve just had terrible experiences. Mera said you can tell if a guy is good in bed from how they move. I never got it until this moment dancing with this wolf. I practically melt against him as he controls the dance, spinning us around to the music. I’ve never danced before in my life like this, but with Lazuri in complete control, he makes me look like I’ve danced a hundred times.

His starlight eyes pour into my own while we move. Across the room, I’m painfully aware of all the other alphas watching us, especially Elias. I can’t bring myself to look at him. I know he hasn’t taken his gaze off us the entire dance.

“What’s your name, Omega?” Lazuri’s voice pulls my attention back to him.

“Verena.”

He hums against my ear, his breath tickling me, and I shiver, my heartbeat increasing.

“Mmm, Verena. I like it. Veri, perhaps more.”

The next song is slower, and he somehow pulls me even closer until all I can feel and smell is him. He smells like the moment midnight hits the forest snow, and the wash of salt water in the air around the lake. “Can I ask you a favour, Lazuri?”

“Only if that sweet mouth of yours calls me by my nickname.”

“Okay, *Laz*. Can I ask you a favour?”

“Fuck, that sounds hot on your lips,” he growls. “Now call me Zuri.”

“Are you always this horny?” I ask, letting him twirl me so my back is pressing against his chest. Something hard nudges against me. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

His low, sexy chuckle makes me shiver again as he turns me back around. His eyes flash with amusement. “What’s the favour, darling?”

“First of all, please don’t call me that. Second, it would be nice not to have bloodshed tonight. I quite like this dress.”

He really laughs this time, the sound deep and somehow soft at the same time. And attractive. A silver tattoo peeks out the top of his shirt, and it reminds me of Elias’s back. “I did not come here to fight,” he says after a moment, “but we may have a problem. One I didn’t see coming.”

I turn my head from his shoulder, his eyes finding mine. “What was that, then?”

He doesn’t answer me, just keeps his eyes on mine. The entire room seems to fade when it’s just me and him dancing in a pack of wolves. My heart pounds for all the wrong reasons and something deep in my chest seems to shout at me. I just can’t understand what it’s saying. Or maybe I’m too afraid to listen to it. Lazuri’s eyes drift to my neck where Elias’s bite mark is, and something possessive flashes in his eyes. “Are you his prisoner, Verena? Do you need a way out of here?”

He doesn’t even try to whisper. I glance at Elias, finding him watching me with a look that says he’s very much ready to kill this alpha for dancing with me for so long and now offering me a way out. When I first met Elias, I might have said yes to Lazuri, but now? I don’t know what I want, or what I see in my future anymore.

“No, I’m not a prisoner.” He has a fae prisoner, I almost say, but I know Lazuri isn’t going to sympathize with the fae

like I do. For all I know, his hatred for their kind could run even deeper than that of Elias. “Yes, he may have forced me to come here, but it was for my own good. Alpha Elias hasn’t treated me like a prisoner since day one. In fact, these last few weeks, I have been treated better than I have in my entire life.”

The fact is... I do feel safe. Safe enough to possibly even grieve. I want to find Mera soon, and I know if I ask Elias to help me, he would. I just need to swallow my pride and ask.

“So, you’re here willingly?”

I tilt my head to the side. He takes the moment, when a few dancers hide us from Elias’s view, to brush his lips across mine. Heat pools between my thighs and it feels like my whole body just burst to life with that tiny, second-long, kiss. “Yes. Why do you care?”

Before he can answer, someone touches his shoulder and we both pause. It’s a man, not quite as tall as Lazuri, but clearly from the same area as his tanned skin and markings match the ones on Lazuri’s arms and neck. He looks between us, bowing his head at Lazuri.

“Alpha, there’s a problem that needs you. Immediately.”

Lazuri slowly lets me go. He lifts my hand, kissing the back, and it feels like pure fire spreads across my skin from the touch of his lips. “I’ll find you soon. Don’t go far, Verena. We have much to talk over.”

I don’t think we do, but I watch him disappear through the crowd along with his kin. I’m finally able to breathe and think rationally again now that I’m not swallowed up by his presence. I search the banquet table for Elias but he’s gone. Several people look my way and some of them make a move toward me. I desperately look around for an escape from the small talk, something I am terribly bad at doing on my own, and a balcony catches my eye.

The cold air pebbles my skin as I walk to the terrace rails and look down on the glittering land before me. At night, the lights reflect off the crystals, and everything is so sparkly, so

ethereal. It looks like a thousand stars have burst from the sky and scattered over the city.

I could grow to love this pack, to not have to struggle every day of my life and live in fear, only ever existing and barely even doing that... It would be so easy. Lost in thoughts of a life I had only ever dreamed about, I don't notice anyone else on the balcony until something cold and sharp presses against my throat. My entire body freezes.

"Scream and I'll slit this pretty throat," an unfamiliar male voice hisses in my ear.

"Why?" I barely get the word out, my voice breathless as my heart pounds with fear.

How could I have been so stupid to have come out here alone?

"I was paid well, Omega slut. I know exactly what you are, hiding here, playing the good little omega bitch." He presses the blade closer to my neck, and the moonlight bounces off it. "The alphas can fight over your dead body after I—"

I slam my hand into his wrist while he's distracted. The dagger slits across my throat, enough to make me cry out in pain, but not enough to cut too deep. It falls to the ground between us as I spin around just in time to see him shift. A growl snarls out of his throat as he forms into a big grey wolf and lunges for me.

I barely manage to grab the dagger before he lands on me and I stab him in the side, through his ribs, and into his heart just as his teeth latch around my shoulder and bite down, making me scream. He may have bitten me and cut my throat, but I got his heart. The wolf still doesn't go down easy. He holds onto my shoulder until his last breath, his teeth ripping through my flesh, and everything goes hazy from the pain. My grip on the dagger slackens and my vision begins to darken.

"Verena!" Elias roars, and soon the wolf is quickly pulled off me and I'm picked up into his arms. "Get the fucking healers! NOW!"

Someone presses fabric against my shoulder and neck to stop the bleeding, but I can't make them out. All I can make out is Elias's face looking down at me and his voice asking me over and over if I'm okay.

"Who the fuck is he?" he snarls, and I watch hazily as Lazuri walks out onto the balcony.

I tilt my head towards him, sensing his arrival like an approaching storm. He pauses at my side and all the colour drains from his face when he looks at the dead wolf being dragged out of sight, leaving nothing but a pool of blood behind. Pure vengeance flashes in his eyes when he peels his gaze away and looks down at me.

"He's *my* beta, and I'd kill you for taking his life... if you weren't my mate."

CHAPTER
TEN



“Elias, I’m fine.” I pull myself away from the worried alpha and collapse onto the velvet chaise that had been rushed out onto the balcony when the healers arrived. The last of them scurries away and closes the doors behind him leaving the three of us alone on the balcony. “Believe me, I’ve been through a lot worse. This is just a little scratch.”

However, my words don’t comfort him like I hoped they would.

A dark look twists his features and it’s mirrored by the alpha across from him.

The one who just called me his mate.

I close my eyes and take a deep, calming breath. *Looks like he’s crazy too.* Thankfully, my shaking from the adrenalin has finally worn off, but it’s left me tired. The whole experience has. Why did Lazuri’s beta try to kill me? And, more importantly, who paid him to do it?

The only suspects I can think of are Bane and Alferis. But Bane is missing—Elias told me he escaped and his wolves can’t find him—and Alferis is in hiding. With everything that happened, I also don’t see them financially capable of hiring an assassin. It’s definitely a cowardly thing to do, and they fit the bill, but they lost everything. So if it wasn’t them... then who hired the assassin to kill me?

When I open my eyes, Elias has moved to my side. He reaches out and I can tell he wants to touch me, but something

stops him, and his hand falls clenched by his side. He cuts his gaze to Lazuri, his entire expression shifting into a venomous scowl. Meanwhile, Lazuri leans against the railing with his arms crossed and blows a long, drawn-out sigh.

“Well, when I thought things would go tits up tonight, I thought it’d be me punching Elias’s face for being a snobby prick like everyone says you are. Not this.”

Elias growls, and Lazuri holds up his hands. “Hey, I don’t decide these things. The gods do.” He slides me a grin that makes Elias’s hackles rise. “Who am I to go against the gods? Especially when they’ve given me such a beautiful mate.”

“Do not make light of this,” Elias growls, his canines flashing in the moonlight. “If it were my beta who almost killed my mate, I’d be out there looking for answers and hunting down the motherfucker who hired him.”

Lazuri narrows his gaze. “If it was your beta, Elias, I’d wipe out your whole fucking pack before searching for those answers. I nearly lost my mate, too, and I’m this close to losing my fucking shit. Don’t. Push me.”

Elias steps forward, his hands fisted. “She’s not your fucking mate!”

“*She* is right here,” I shout at both. “And do you know what? I’m too fed up from nearly being assassinated to deal with this bullshit right now... I am neither of your mates because mates don’t exist.”

“Don’t they?” Lazuri looks hard at me, and warmth spreads unbidden through my body.

The heat collects between my legs, and I’m wet within seconds, my cheeks flushed from the awareness of it. Then the heat turns into a cramp in my stomach—a cramp that screams for me to go to them. To be with them. *Fuck!*

“N-no,” I hear myself say, though it doesn’t sound convincing even to my ears. “They don’t. They haven’t for years, so stop bickering and fighting over me like I’m your toy. It’s making my head hurt.” I shoot up from the chaise, so quickly I nearly lose my balance if not for Elias steadying me

with his strong hands. I swat him away and it occurs to me how *really* not in the mood I am for their bullshit. “I think I need some fresh air.”

“You’re already outside, beautiful.”

I glower at Laz. “Then I need some fresh air away from you two because you’re driving me fucking insane!”



ELIAS’S CARRIAGE is already prepared by the time I reach the main entrance. Lordin sits beside the driver, who hops down to open the door and help me inside. Only when the door closes behind him, am I assured Elias doesn’t plan on following me, and I breathe a sigh of relief. A minute more and my exhausted mind would’ve had me pushing those damn alphas over the balcony railings. I’m not ready to admit that I’m their mate, and I’m really not in the mood to be interrogated. I’m as clueless about the assassin as they are.

The journey back to Elias’s home goes by much quicker, and Alix is waiting for me when the carriage draws to a halt. He opens the door, takes one look at me, and pulls out two giant blades that were hidden somewhere on his body. How and where he managed to hide them, I have no idea since both weapons are the length of his arm.

“Where are they?”

I climb out of the carriage while shaking my head at him. “It’s not what you think.”

“Is that your blood?” he asks, his blades still poised for attack.

“Okay. So it’s sort of what you think. But not *that*.”

Lowering his blades only slightly, he asks in a calmer tone, “Then what happened? Where’s Elias?”

“Back at the party. He’s fine. Just massively pissed off,” Lordin replies.

“As for what happened,” I say, blowing out a long sigh. “An assassin tried to kill me at the ball. But don’t worry, I managed to kill him first. Oh, and his alpha also claims I’m his mate. Fun night all around.”

He watches me walk by him with his eyes open and mouth slightly ajar.

“Probably a good idea you guys go back to calm him down,” I say over my shoulder “because the alpha who claims I’m his mate... is Lazuri.”

I just reach the entrance when the carriage takes off again, Alix inside. Lordin remains this time but takes a different route to the house. He’s probably going to see Alma.

Once I’m inside the house, I make my way straight for the dungeon, no longer caring who sees or hears me. Layla spots me along the way. I smile but don’t stop to talk to her, so she runs after me, calling out my name.

“Omega Verena! Omega Verena, please wait! Omega—”

“What is it?” I snap, coming to a sharp halt at the empty courtyard. Layla runs toward me, her face flushed and her breathing erratic. I immediately regret taking my frustration out on her. “Sorry, Layla. It’s just been a... long night. I didn’t mean to snap at you. What’s up?”

“No need... to apologise... I heard... what happened. Oh, Verena, we’re all so glad you’re safe!” Catching her breath again, she straightens. “I thought perhaps you might like to change clothes before going out again?”

I glance down at my outfit. Oh. Right. The beautiful dress has been utterly ruined. The corset and laces are hanging off me, the skirt has been torn, the bodice ripped, and so much blood—my own and my enemy’s—covers the gorgeous fabric. It’s a little ironic that I chose to wear red tonight.

“Layla, your beautiful dress. I’m so sorry!”

Her eyes widen and she vehemently shakes her head. “It’s only a dress. I can make plenty more of them. And don’t worry, Alpha Elias will make those rotten wolves pay. We’re all sure of it.”

I nod but keep silent. I don't want to say that their alpha also claims I'm his mate and that there's a part of me that is becoming A-ok with that. It's a stupid, clearly reckless part, but a part of me all the same.

"Let's get you changed into clean clothes," Layla says, pivoting on her heel.

I follow her back to my room and she rummages through the wardrobe, pulling out various dresses. The thought of wearing another corset tonight makes my head spin. I pull out my old clothes—Mera's tunic, a dark pair of leggings, and a pair of soft slippers that feel like clouds wrapped around my feet when I slip into them.

"Your bath has yet to be prepared," Layla says, clearly unhappy about my choice of clothing, but she doesn't say anything. "But it won't take long for the servants to bring in the water. Would you like some supper while you wait?"

"I'm okay for now, Layla. I'll wash later. But supper would be nice."

She nods and hurries from the room. I grab one of the silk scarfs again to wrap up the food for Rueven, and quickly use a wash basin to wipe some of the dried blood from my face. My hair... Well, that's beyond a wash basin at this point. It'll need to be washed several times to get all the blood out. But I don't know how long I have before Elias comes back. I decide to just tie it back for now. It's not like the fae will care.

Fortunately, it doesn't take long for Layla to come back with the supper tray. I thank her for her help, politely decline her offer to wash my hair *even just a little bit*, and wait for her to leave before I wrap up the food. I don't have any wine but I'm sure the fae will still appreciate it.

The walk to the dungeon is less stressful this time. The only person I come across is Alma in the kitchen. She slides me some fruit tarts before cursing the beta who tried to kill me and then warns that I have only an hour before Elias returns. Lordin explained to her that their alpha wants to give me some space, and he knows I'll be safest with his inner pack. Only they know the way in and out of this area, which is probably

why Elias has let me roam freely whenever he's not been with me. I bet that would change if he found out *where* I've been roaming.

I thank Alma for her kindness and hurry down the passageway. Rueven stands waiting for me. While his black eye looks better, fresh bruises cover the side of his face, and rope marks wrap around his neck. Rage fills me and I grip the food so tightly my fingers crush through the bread. The fae smirks at me as though it's nothing.

“We've got to stop meeting like this, Mercy.”

I step out and into the light. Rueven's smirk vanishes at the sight of me, and his features twist into a grimace. The chain on his ankle rattles as he moves to my side in one impossibly swift movement and lifts my chin, tilting my face to the moonlight. He doesn't say anything while he looks at me. The fact he remains silent but his face burns with silent rage sends a nervous flutter rushing through me.

“It's not what you think,” I say, for the second time tonight.

“What am I thinking?” His tone is sharp, clipped, his eyes cold. He continues holding the side of my face, his touch surprisingly gentle.

“That Elias is responsible for this,” I breathe, “but he's not. It was an Arcturus wolf who's already been dealt with. Can we... not talk about this? I've talked about it enough for one night.”

Rueven releases me, but not before he glares at the wound on my shoulder peeking out from underneath my tunic. He gently tugs at my collar and pulls it down, revealing the bite marks from the beta. They've healed remarkably well considering but it will take days for them to disappear entirely. Just like the bite Elias left on my neck. Rueven's eyes narrow and his tongue swipes at his lips. I can't help but tense at the intensity of his gaze and he cuts his eyes to me, sensing my alarm.

“Do you trust me?”

“No,” I breathe out, and he smirks. “But the gods do, otherwise you wouldn’t be here.”

I barely trust the gods anymore, but I’m too curious, too spellbound by the fae, to pull away from him.

He arches a brow and leans in, bringing his lips to my shoulder. “You’re wise not to trust me, Mercy.”

Yet I close my eyes anyway, my heart thrashing like a wild beast, and wait. But nothing happens. I wait for a moment longer. Still nothing. Peeking at him through my lashes, the fae is looking up at me with an amused grin on his face. He slowly lowers his mouth and gently, ever so gently, brushes his lips across my wound. A tingling sensation spreads through me in warm waves. Rueven parts his lips and licks me, then he kisses me and he slowly repeats the process. The tingling sensation quickly turns into something frighteningly pleasurable, and a moan wrestles its way through my lips.

I gasp at the sound escaping me and try to pull back but Rueven pushes me against the wall and grabs my wrists, pinning them above my head, causing the parcel of food to smack onto the ground. I surrender to his touch, unable to move or breathe in anything other than his scent invading me like a winter breeze channelling through the forest at night.

An unexpected protest leaves my mouth when he moves away. The tingling sensation immediately ends and the pleasure that had been gathering at my core dissipates. I open my eyes, shocked by my own reaction, and follow the fae’s line of sight. The wound on my shoulder has completely healed. There’s not a trace remaining, only the scent of the fae’s saliva on my skin.

“How did you...”

Rueven straightens and licks his lips, his eyes intent on mine. “A hidden secret of the fae.”

“Your saliva contains healing properties?” I ask incredulously.

He frowns at me. “You do not know?”

I take a calming breath, his scent still making me dizzy. “Know what?”

Rueven stares at me in silence, and my already racing heart skips a beat.

“Know what?” I press him, trying desperately hard to pull myself together.

Why did I let him kiss me like that? And why did it feel so fucking good?

“You’re part fae,” he says. “That’s why you can’t shift. Fae wolves can only shift for the first time when they’re mated.”

I sway on my feet, barely able to comprehend what he’s saying. I’ve been a No-Shift Omega my entire life. He must be confused. Or he’s joking with me. My back presses to the wall again as I shake my head in disbelief.

“No, that can’t be right. I’m—an Omega. I don’t have fae blood in me.”

It’s not possible. It can’t be. Could it?

Rueven’s frown deepens. “Why else do you think I spared your life? I could smell you were part fae even before we attacked.” He pauses, his eyes studying me intently. “Who were your parents?”

“I... I don’t know. I was left in the mortal realm as a baby then taken to live with the wolves when I was ten.” I touch where he kissed. The injuries have completely gone. “I’m really part fae?”

He nods, and a sense of relief tries to rush its way through me. I suppress it, refusing to believe my entire existence has been a lie until now. All my life, I’ve been treated as a freak. I’ve been enslaved, used, abused, kicked to the curb, and always—always—treated as an outcast. But that was because I was a No-Shift. Surely it wasn’t because I was part fae?

No. That can’t be why I was an outcast. Alferis would never have allowed me into his pack if his enemy’s blood coursed through my veins. He must not have known. Yet

words come back to haunt me, the very words he said before he tore my world apart.

You are unique to me.

He had said he wanted to mate with me because I was *unique* to him, and that our union had to be a willing one in order to earn the gods' forgiveness. If what Rueven says is true, then it all makes sense. I'm not, and have never been just an Omega.

I'm also fae.

That's why my screams shattered the crystals. That's why I can't shift yet have all my other wolf senses. That's probably why I was left with the humans when I was just a baby. I thought I was abandoned because I was unloved and unwanted, but maybe my parents were trying to protect me and save me from being killed.

No-Shifts can at least be contained in society, but fae wolves like me are too powerful, too unpredictable with our gifts, and that's why the realms tried to wipe us out long ago. Our existence is forbidden. Apparently even the gods themselves condemn our existence, or so the legend goes.

How did nobody know? How did *I* not know?

I slide down the wall, my legs giving out under me. Rueven steadies me until I'm sitting on the ground, then he picks up the food and settles on my left. For several minutes, neither of us talk. We just sit there in silence while raindrops tap on the bars of the window.

"That's why I could hear her," I say, more to myself than anything.

Rueven unwraps the food and hands me one of the fruit tarts. "Hear who?"

I shake my head and he places the tart on my lap anyway before picking up the other one. He eats while I train my gaze on the passageway, recalling the fae I met in the courtyard. I shouldn't have been able to hear her but now it makes sense why I was able to.

“The bird outside... She offered to help get you out of here.” I turn my head to him and nod to his necklace. “She said she needed that to open up a portal—”

“What form did she take?” Before I can answer, Rueven cuts in again. “Was it a raven?”

I nod hesitantly. “She said she was your sister?”

“Of course, she did!” Rueven drops his food and buries his hands in his hair with a groan, his face turning red with anger. “I’m surprised she didn’t say she was my resurrected fucking mother this time!”

Cold dread creeps over me, and I can’t help but feel like I’ve done something terribly wrong. I stay silent, waiting for him to calm down. He grabs his hair and hits his head against the wall before taking a deep breath.

“She’s not my sister. She’s a spy, sent here to trick you into getting her this.” His fingers wrap around the black crystal, clenching it protectively. “It’ll give them all they’ve ever wanted.” Glancing at me, he says in a much softer voice, “Don’t trust her, or anyone else pretending to be my ally. They’re snakes. Got it?”

I nod again. “Snakes. Got it.”

My gut told me there was something off about the woman. I’m glad I listened to it.

His grip slowly relaxes on his necklace and he turns to me. “That thing I was eating was delicious. Are you going to eat yours?”

I laugh and shake my head, giving him the fruit tart. “Help yourself. Alma made it.”

“Alma?” he repeats before plucking a cherry off the tart and popping it onto his tongue. “I may have to hire this Alma once I get out of here.” I smile and rest my head against the wall again while he eats the tart. “Why do you really want to leave? It’s not like you’re the prisoner here.”

I wrap my arms around my knees. “A cage with its door open is still a cage. I don’t want to be caged anymore. I want

to fly.”

“Then do it,” he whispers, “and I’ll fly with you. Purely so you can pay back your debt to me, of course.”

A grin slides its way across my lips. “Of course, fae. How could I possibly forget? You remind me every time.”

“Rune,” he says after a moment as he leans his head against the wall beside mine. “Call me Rune.”

CHAPTER
ELEVEN



I enter Elias's study, admiring the rows of books stacked against the dark wooden walls and the gorgeous heavy oak furniture. The stone fireplace in the corner makes the room look so warm and inviting. Cosy, almost—if not for the two powerful alphas sitting on chairs facing each other. Tension radiates off them in waves. It's like they're having some kind of alpha standoff.

Neither one of them looks away, not until I fully enter the room, and then they train their focus on me. My pulse spikes and I try to calm it as I walk to them. I haven't seen either of them since I left them on the balcony last night. Lordin said Elias came to check on me once he got back but he didn't want to wake me. In a way, I wish he had.

I've missed him.

And for some crazy-ass reason, I've missed the alpha next to him.

The door closes behind me and I stop for a moment, eyeing the space between them. Two empty seats are positioned between the alphas' chairs. It's clearly a test to see which alpha I want to sit beside—which one I prefer. I inwardly groan at the ridiculousness of it. It's all so silly. But it also feels like whatever decision I make might be an important one, which is why they're waiting so intently for me to pick. Here, I thought they'd managed to settle things but the look on their faces conveys otherwise. And the blood on their knuckles.

Their eyes burn through me when I walk between them and head straight for the desk. Pushing several maps and paperwork aside, I hop up onto the edge and cross my legs. I'm calling this desk neutral ground and my ass is sticking to it. Elias crosses his arms, a faint smirk pulling at his lips.

He seems to think he's won something. Or maybe he's amused by me. Lazuri, on the other hand, looks like he'd rather be anywhere else but here. His blood-stained knuckles turn white as he grips the armrest, and I catch claw marks on the side of his throat.

"So..." I clear my throat and clasp my hands on my lap, trying to convey a sense of calmness I don't really feel inside. "Have you decided not to kill each other over me?" Neither answers me, and I end up babbling away, praying someone stops me. "Because, not being funny, war will not impress me. I don't want a mate, let alone two alphas. This is just insane. Fated mates, the whole situation, it's—"

"Unheard of," Lazuri finally cuts me off, much to my relief. "That we can all agree on. A shared bond is... rare, but not impossible."

I flick my eyes between them, my pulse erratic. Lazuri stretches out his legs, his hands no longer clenched while Elias sits with his back straight, a calm, slightly cold look on his face. But there's a slight tension in his shoulders that hints at how he's really feeling, and it's far from calm.

"We've agreed you're as stubborn as you are beautiful," Lazuri says, "and war is not going to impress you or sway you either way." His eyes drift over me and he licks his lips, the action making my heart jump a little. "I have waited for the gods to bring me a female worthy of my attention and a place at my side. They have gifted us both with you. I see there might be a lesson in this magic, a lesson from the stars and the moon themselves. Perhaps we need to learn from them. Perhaps we need to... share."

Elias inclines his head in agreement yet still that tension remains. "We don't like it, but we believe it's the will of the

gods, and to go against them might doom both our packs. As you've seen yourself, Verena."

I scoff at that. "Yeah, I've seen what happens when you piss off the gods. They can be just as cruel, just as vicious."

Elias nods again. "Neither of us are willing to risk that," he resumes. "A fated mate is a blessing to us both and to ignore such a gift would be an insult to the gods, and we will risk no further harm to you."

Both alphas nod once more in silent agreement. They must have been talking all night, and they both reek of whiskey, which I can see they've had plenty of from the many empty glasses scattered around the room. Some of them have even been smashed on the floor, the shards dipped in blood. Probably Elias's, going by the cuts on his hand.

It was clearly a long night for the two of them and I'm so relieved they're no longer at each other's throats. If these crazy alphas shift inside this room, they'll not only wreck everything around us, but quite possibly crush me in the process. I'm only in the room for five minutes before the scent of them both overwhelms me and I can hardly breathe as heat pools between my legs. It's too much, both of them like this. I crack the door open, just for some fresh air before I do something stupid.

"You said this kind of bond isn't impossible," I say, turning my attention to Lazuri. Lazuri smirks at me, breathing in a long, long breath. The fresh air is not hiding how wet my panties are right now. Fuck. "How do you know that? How do you know I *am* your fated mate and the gods aren't mistaken?"

"The gods never make mistakes," he says, and that smirk of his appears again, curling its way over his lips. I hate how sexy he looks when he smiles like that. "How do I know you're my mate? Because when you get wet, Verena, I can taste it on my fucking tongue." He pulls his shirt down, revealing the strange mark on his chest I saw when we danced. "And because of this."

My face flushes but I keep my eyes on the mark, trying to make sense of what he's saying. I try not to give away that this

isn't the first time I've seen a mark like this; the fact it glows in the moonlight makes it hard to forget. It's just like the tattoo on Elias's back, except it's a different shape and on a different part of the body. Well. I thought it was a tattoo. Now that I'm looking at Lazuri's, I'm beginning to wonder if it's a scar.

"Only alphas are born with such a mark," Elias explains. "It glows and throbs when we're with our mate. That's how I found you that night. It guided me to you. For Omegas, your pupils are blown when you're near your mate, and you grow slick with need. When you go into heat, this can become painful from what I'm told. Fuck, I can smell you."

I stare at the mark, stunned into complete silence.

Now there's no way I can deny this whole mate thing.

I look between them, knowing full well I'm clutching at straws now. "How do you know your marks aren't, uhh, glowing for each other?"

It's worth a shot.

Lazuri only chuckles. "Because I want to claim you, Verena, not that ugly bastard over there."

Elias straightens in his chair and nods stiffly. "Another thing we can agree on." Then he looks at me and his features soften. "I didn't want to believe it myself but there's no denying he's fated to you too. We both are."

My head spinning, I stare down at the floor, scarcely able to collect my own thoughts. I really wanted to fight this fated mate thing but how can I with their supposed proof?

Two mates. Two. Fucking. Mates.

Scrap that. Two *alpha* mates. As if the gods haven't fucked with me enough already.

"How will this even work?"

"You will spend equal time in my pack and Lazuri's," Elias answers. "The travel between us is no more than a week and we've agreed for you to spend three weeks and then a week travel between, so you spend one month with us both. For now, this will give you a chance to recover from last night

and find your bearings. You are painfully unaware of most of the world and your position is suddenly one of great strength. Time in each pack, with us both, gives you time to find yourself and meet the people who will look up to you.”

I inwardly cringe at the last part of what he said. I don't want anyone looking up at me. Kris looked up to me and now she's dead. I couldn't help her.

I couldn't help her.

Lazuri takes over, sparing me from my guilt. “You will be safe in our company.”

I raise an eyebrow at him. “You sure about that? Your own beta just tried to kill me and I've heard your pack is nothing short of aggressive and dangerous. How safe will I be exactly?”

Lazuri's low growl echoes around the small room. “He was paid by someone whose head will soon decorate my halls. If you had left him alive long enough for me to question him, we might have an answer sooner as to who it was. No one will touch you again now that I've announced you as my fated mate. I doubt he would have gone after you if he knew, but he was a sly fucker who loved gold more than his own head.”

“Or his heart,” I mutter, and he smirks, recalling the way I killed him.

“Verena,” Elias softly but firmly begins. “You were left as a baby and we don't know who your parents are. An Omega would have been sensed at birth, so they knew you were a very powerful baby, but they abandoned you to mortals. You may have enemies you don't even know about who might not have been aware you even survived until now. I have a feeling leaving you with the humans as a slave was their way of trying not to get you killed. There are many options we need to look into, but we have time.”

I rub the side of my neck, brushing my fingers over where Elias's bite still marks my skin. I'm thankful Rueven didn't erase it when he healed my shoulder. Lazuri watches me trace the bite with my fingers, and a low growl rumbles in his chest.

“Are you seriously planning to share?” I glance at them sceptically. “You alphas are always stubborn, possessive, and used to being in complete control of everything. Sharing isn’t something you do.”

Lazuri spreads his arms across the arms of the chair. “Perhaps. But my wolf doesn’t want to kill Elias anymore, so there’s that.”

“It is a good sign our wolves are in agreement,” Elias adds. “We will make this work for you—for us all. We have to. Do you have any more questions right now?”

There’s so many questions I want to ask them, such as—are you for fucking real?—but only one question makes its way past my lips.

“When is the fae’s trial again? I’m not leaving with Lazuri until the trial is over.” Wrapping my arms around my waist, I add firmly, “I want to be there to make sure it’s fair for him.”

They both look at me suspiciously and I wonder if they know I’ve been sneaking down to give him food, and that I think about Rueven nearly all the time. Far more than I’d care to admit.

Lazuri leans forward. “Why do you care so much about this fae? Elias informs me he aided in destroying your pack.”

“I don’t care about him,” I answer, far too quickly, “but I’ve never seen a trial, and I want to be there. Plus, I was there when my previous pack was attacked. I’m a witness.”

As though pleased with my response, Lazuri nods and leans back.

“The trial will be tomorrow,” Elias says, also pleased with my answer. They don’t know me that well, and at the moment, that works in my favour. “The other alphas will gather here for it.”

Lazuri stands at the same time as Elias. He offers his hand and Elias claps his shoulder while they shake. Okay. So I guess they are friends now. That was... unexpected. Definitely the last thing I expected would happen when I walked in here.

Lazuri turns to me. “I have to prepare our travel for tomorrow evening.”

Tomorrow. It didn’t hit me that I’d actually have to leave Elias so soon. My heart lurches at the thought. I was just starting to make his pack my home and find people I like. And, if I’m being completely honest with myself, I don’t want to leave just yet.

Lazuri leans down to kiss my cheek, his rough beard tickling me. “Tomorrow, Veri.”

He then walks out and leaves me with Elias. The alpha watches me with his arms crossed. We stare at each other as if neither of us know exactly what to say. Then Elias breaks it.

“When I found my mate, I did not expect to have to share her with another alpha.” His sharp voice softens along with his features as he slowly unfolds his arms. “But if this is what the gods want then I will accept it. For you. For them.”

I search his face, looking for more than just “for the gods.” But his expression remains cool and guarded, and I give a frustrated sigh, jumping off the desk toward him.

“Screw the gods, Elias, and be real with me. Is this what you want?”

“No,” he bites out with a loud growl. “But you saw his mark. The gods have carved this path for us all, and I can do nothing about it!” He glares up at the ceiling as if he can see the stars and moon above, the gods watching over our every move. “I don’t know what their plan is for us. Maybe the world needs to change and maybe it starts with this.”

He lowers his eyes to mine. “You are a link between the most powerful packs in the realms now. Perhaps the gods want peace between us all. I don’t know. But what I do know, with absolute certainty, is that I will not risk losing you by starting a war with him. It would end up with dozens of my pack killed—dozens of his pack killed too—and even if I did manage to kill him, it would only hurt you.”

He walks over to me, and I don’t move, my heart pounding so fast in my chest. “I promised I would never hurt you,

Verena. I don't want to do anything that hurts you. Ever. You're mine to protect until the stars above fall down on us and take us back to the gods."

He gently caresses the side of my face, brushing away a loose strand of hair. I can only say his name, like a plea to the gods themselves.

"Elias—"

His eyes darken before he leans down and kisses me.

Elias kisses me like he never wants to stop, devouring and claiming my mouth with every brush of his lips. He groans, deepening the kiss, and I gasp as he picks me up by the waist and pushes me against the bookshelves. I don't want him to stop, I quickly realise, and the realisation shocks me to my core.

I never want Elias to stop kissing me like this. I can't think of anything but his large hands tightly squeezing my ass, pulling my body to his. His scent surrounds me, tugging my senses into wanting nothing more than him, this stubborn alpha who holds me so blissfully captive in his arms. Until he stops, and he's almost as breathless as me, and rests his forehead against mine, his eyes briefly closing.

"You are not ready for what this would mean, my Ena."

My Ena. He's never called me that before. While I don't understand it, I like it. But now that he isn't kissing me, the reality of what we were close to doing hits me fast, and my stomach twists into a knot. My body wants him, it has since we met, but my mind isn't there yet.

Sex with Elias wouldn't just be sex. It would be mating, and it would be forever.

An eternal bond not even death itself can shatter.

Elias tilts my head up when I look away from him. "Why do you frown?"

Because I'm at war with myself, torn about whether to tell him the truth. I want him—stars above, I want him—but that's what frightens me. I never thought I'd want a wolf ever again,

let alone an alpha. It's more than frightening. It's simply incomprehensible.

And the fact there's *two* of them...

"Why do you frown, my Ena?" he repeats, this time in a firmer voice.

"Because sometimes I wonder why you want me."

He wouldn't want me if he knew the truth—that I was the one who caused the downfall of my own pack and that I'm also part fae. I wouldn't be Elias's fated mate then. I'd be his enemy.

And that's why I keep running from him.

From myself.

I don't want things to change between us and for Elias to start hating me.

His sudden growl makes me flinch, and a gasp leaves me when he wraps his hand around my throat and forces me to look up at him. "You—are my *mate*. I've wanted you from the moment I could breathe and knew you existed. Even now, I want nothing more than to strip you of these clothes in my way and fill you with my cock until I'm knotted deep inside you, and every male out there knows that you're mine. Especially Lazuri." He kisses me again, this time harder, and pulls my lower lip between his teeth with a groan. "It's driving me fucking crazy, how much I want you."

Words fail me as he tightens his grip a little, causing stars to dance over my vision and my body to flare in response to his touch. I can only meet his lips for another deep, passionate kiss that literally takes my breath away and weakens me to my core. I'm so turned on by everything, that at first, I don't register him pulling away, not until he sets me on the ground and looks down at me with pure carnal need burning in his eyes.

My breath catches in my throat. The way he stands over me with my body pressed against the bookcase makes me feel so small in his shadow. So tiny. Yet when he swoops me into his arms, I immediately feel safe again, and the irony makes

me inwardly laugh. I once said whatever safety Elias could offer would mean little to me. Now it's beginning to mean everything, and that terrifies me most of all.

He carries me to his desk and I wrap my arms around his neck, nuzzling into his chest. His heart thrashing against my cheek makes me smile as I realise he's just as excited as I am. Just as eager. He sweeps everything off the desk with one hand, and with the other he rests me on the edge and slides a thigh between my legs, nudging them open with his knee. He then runs his fingers down the valley of my throat and slides them between my breasts.

His eyes never leave me as he takes everything in. Every breath of air I drag into my lungs, every flicker of the pulse dancing in the plains of my neck. Even the nervous bite of my lower lip as I wait to see what he'll do next. He drinks it all in as if he's been starving for this moment his whole life, which I know he has, because deep inside, I've hungered for it too.

Elias lowers himself between my legs and slowly lifts my dress so that it rests on my hips. Even on his knees, he's still so tall that he has to dip his head just to kiss my waist. He runs his tongue slowly down my thigh, teasing me, kissing, and nibbling his way toward my core. I part my legs wider, inviting him in.

When he inhales my scent, my cheeks flame and I let out a surprised gasp. I didn't expect him to do...that. And he doesn't stop there. Elias breathes me in deeply, as though I'm the nectar to his survival—a drug he can't get enough of. He flicks his tongue over my clit and my gasp gives way to a moan. Elias groans against me, once more breathing in my scent, then he presses a kiss to my sweet spot and licks me again.

“Fuck, you taste as good as you smell, my Ena.”

I throw my head back and moan his name in response. He growls and bites my inner thigh, the sharp pain snapping my gaze down to him. He looks up at me, his face buried between my legs, his eyes intense.

“This is how much I want you, Verena.”

He resumes his sweet, beautiful torture of my clit until it's all I can think about, and I'm arching my back and digging my nails into his desk. They cut through the wood but I can't stop myself. My legs tremble and close around his head. He grabs my thighs and holds them open, his tongue merciless in its pursuit. I move my hands to Elias's head to keep from ruining his desk, and gently thread my fingers through his hair, my orgasm close. So close.

"Do you believe me now?" His whisper caresses me softly, brushing over my clit.

"Yes," I gasp out as my body jerks in response, moments away from climaxing.

"Good. Now don't you ever doubt my desire for you again." He increases his speed, switching between his tongue and fingers, and glances up at me. "You are my mate. The only female I'll ever want is you. Got it?"

This time I can only nod as my pleasure explodes and Elias watches me shudder and again moan out his name. He doesn't pull his eyes off me. It's like he's soaking up my pleasure, engraving every moment into the depths of his mind forever. It's so fucking hot. I fall back against the desk, panting and gasping for breath. When I peek through my lashes up at Elias, he's still staring at me, but something has shifted in his expression. Something dark.

"What's... what's wrong?" I ask between pants while pushing up onto my elbows.

"You're fucking perfect," he says, standing and pushing away from me. "Fuck! You need to leave before I do something you're not ready for me to do."

Reality crashes down on me as if a veil has been lifted and I can see again. Elias is right. If I stay here a moment longer, I'll officially become his mate, and neither of us are ready for that just yet. I'm not ready to tell him the truth.

Elias helps me off the desk and I quickly adjust my dress, letting the material fall to my ankles again. My whole being tingles from Elias's touch, hungry for more, but I really need

to leave and clear my head. Without even looking at Elias, I hurry to the door. But his voice catches me before I can open it.

“As soon as you’re ready, Verena...” I look back to meet his burning gaze and my heart jumps from the sheer intensity of it. “I’m making you mine. I vow it to the gods themselves that I will be the first one to claim my mate. No one else.”

I nod with a silent agreement that surprises me before I close the door and run down the empty hallway. Only when I’m sure I’m alone and far enough from him do I allow myself a moment to pull myself back together.

Shit, that was way too close. I’m getting in over my head with that bloody alpha. My heart thrashes against my ribcage as I take a deep, calming breath, but all I can think about is Elias and the things he said he’ll do to me. And how I so very badly want to let him do it—to be the first one to claim me and truly make me his fated mate.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

Maybe Elias isn’t the crazy one after all. Maybe he’s just making me that way.

I adjust my hair quickly before I step outside into the courtyard. The sun is setting low in the sky and everything is hidden in dark red shadows where the light is slowly bleeding away. By the time I reach the bedroom, my heart is still pounding up a storm, and Elias’s scent is the only thing I can smell. It clings to me so wonderfully, and his lips still feel like they’re pressed against my mouth.

I close the door and strip off my clothes, immediately crawling into the bed. But for once it feels cold and empty, and my body starts to shiver. I jump out and open the wardrobe, looking for the cloak Elias gave me the first day I met him. My heart stutters when my fingers brush the soft navy material. It still has his scent. I drag the cloak to the bed and wrap myself in it, breathing in his scent. I have the urge to fill the bed with all his clothes, and Lazuri’s too, just so I can nest into them. I’ve never experienced such a strange urge before.

Although I feel warmer wrapped in Elias's cloak, my body is still buzzing from his touch, and I know I need another release before I do something stupid like—oh, I don't know, go back to Elias and pick up where we left off.

Or go looking for Lazuri.

Neither of them is a good option right now. Both will land me in more trouble.

I reach under the cloak and slide my hand down my body, caressing the places Elias touched and devoured with his tongue until I reach my core. I rub myself gently, thinking about him, the way he pinned me down and how close he was to fucking me. I'm still so wet from his teasing. It doesn't take long before my pleasure builds and I'm on the edge again.

One more swirl around my clit, and I'm arching my back with toe-curling pleasure.

But it's not Elias I'm thinking about anymore. It's Rune.

Rune's dark eyes, his tilted bowed lips, his rippling muscles, and sleek—

Suddenly I'm not in my mind anymore, but in his.

The dungeon beneath the kitchen fades away into a forest filled with rain-covered leaves. Icy droplets splash my cheeks—no, *his* cheeks—as he crouches in the shadows, listening to the deep, laboured breaths and sweet cries of a newborn baby located somewhere nearby.

Rueven follows the sound, and some moments later finds a woman running through the forest, leaving a trail of blood in her wake. She clutches the baby to her chest, bundled in thick blankets that will not keep it warm enough with how cold the night is. He frowns, an unexpected protectiveness washing over him.

The female stops, wheezing as she leans on a tree before lifting the crying baby to her shoulder. The baby's silver eyes find Rueven's through the trees and he frowns as that look alone makes his heart slam in his chest.

The heavy rain falls harder as he follows her through the forest. The thick trees hide him in shadows and mask his scent, even the sound of his footsteps, from the fleeing wolf. He wonders how badly she is injured, and why three dark wolves are hunting them. Rueven moves toward them before he even realises it, his body coated in darkness.

The wolves fall easily under his magic; the forest swallowing their bodies until there is silence once more. He moves close to the female as she breaks out of the forest where he can't go and collapses in front of the gates to the mortal realm, the nasty chimes screeching in the night.

The baby cries and cries, each cry weaker than the last until humans rush out of the city, picking it up and leaving the dead wolf in the mud. He turns back to the forest, the baby's cries echoing in his mind for years to come...

I gasp, pushed out of his mind with a rough, painful shove until I'm lying on the bed again, trying to catch my breath.

That baby... was me.

CHAPTER
TWELVE



Cold hands grip my shoulders, forcing me to wake after finally falling asleep again.

I blink at the candle flickering in front of me. Behind the flame, Alma moves quickly as she pulls Elias’s cloak off my body. A cold breeze rushes over my arms and legs, and the sound of wolves howling and a bell tolling three times instantly fills me with alarm.

We’re under attack.

“We must hurry.” Alma sweeps to the wardrobe, her night robes billowing behind her. “Fae have been spotted at the border. A whole army of them. We must evacuate.”

My pulse soaring, I nod as I slide my feet into the pair of boots I’ve kept hidden under the bed since day one. Then I reach under the mattress and grab the dagger Elias let me keep tucked there to help me feel more at ease when I joined his pack.

I wrap my hand around the black leather handle and twist my wrist. The gold blade shines in the light. It’s a perfect size—as if Elias had it made for me. That would explain why I found it gift wrapped on the bed one morning. It was like Elias knew I needed something to help me feel safer here.

“Here, take this.” Alma rummages through the wardrobe and throws me a brown satchel. “I had Layla pack it some time ago in case they invaded. There’s some clothes, food, and basic necessities to get by until we reach the tunnels.”

I grip the satchel tightly, my hands shaking. “Where’s Elias?”

And Lazuri and Rueven, I want to ask, but I can tell by her face now isn’t the time for questions. She slams the wardrobe doors and grabs Elias’s cloak from the bed.

“Our alpha is leading the attack and has instructed Lordin to take us to safety. We don’t have a lot of time. Lordin is waiting for us in the courtyard. Hurry now, let’s go!”

She drapes the cloak over me, and I slide the satchel over my shoulder. Screams echo as wolves howl outside and my heart lurches into my throat. I try not to think about all the bloodshed that will be spilled tonight. It was only a matter of time before the fae would come for their prince. I just wish it hadn’t needed to end this way.

Alma ushers me toward the door. The balcony opening stops us dead in our tracks. I hold out my weapon, keeping Alma placed behind me, and watch the fae bird Rueven warned me about fly into the room. Before the raven lands on the floor, it transforms into a beautiful woman with long silver hair and a moonlight dress that floats behind her as she saunters across the room. At first, she looks at Alma, and her lips peel back in disgust before she flicks her eyes to me. They gleam like shards of glass, broken under a heel of contempt.

A slow, lazy smile spreads over her lips. “Don’t go with the wolves, Verena. It’s a trap.”

Her voice is just like the one I heard inside my head when she was a raven—soft but haughty, and bored almost, as though her superior being is far too important to be in the presence of wolves.

“That’s ironic,” I say, holding my dagger out to her, “because you were the one who tried to trap me. I know who and what you are, Darcia.”

“Oh, really?” She takes a step, her smile turning into a smug grin that makes my hackles rise. “And what exactly is that, *Mercy*?”

“A snake,” I spit at her, refusing to let her get under my skin. Obviously she was listening to my conversations with the fae. That’s what snakes do. “Rueven told me all about you and your tricks.”

“Did he now?” Her eyes light up with an almost sickening kind of glee. Another step, and I prepare to fight with her. “What did the prince tell you about me? Did he tell you that his father sentenced my people to die and that’s one of the reasons I came here—to avenge them? Or did he tell you that he stood by and watched millions of men, women, and children be slaughtered because they were different from the rest of us?”

She takes one more step, only six feet away from me now. “Did he tell you, Verena, that the prince carried out those orders and burned an entire city to ashes because he was too afraid to stand up to his daddy?” When I don’t answer her, her smirk deepens. “Seems he hasn’t told you anything. He’s the real monster in all of this. Not me.”

My grip on the dagger trembles as I clench my hand, keeping the tip of the blade pointed at her. I have no way of knowing if she’s telling the truth or not. I barely know Rueven myself. I’ve caught glimpses of his past here and there in comments he quickly diverted from during our secret chats.

It doesn’t seem like he has a good relationship with his father. And even though I’ve only known Rueven a few weeks, I don’t see him capable of doing any of those things. He showed me mercy when my own kind didn’t show me it. He saved my life, and I was just a stranger to him. He was even concerned when he thought the wolves were mistreating me.

My heart tells me that Rueven can’t be the monster in this.

“I think you’re lying,” I say, nodding subtly at Alma who begins turning the doorknob. “I think you must have a lot of hatred in your heart to blame Rueven for all those awful things.”

“It’s not hatred that’s in my heart. It’s justice!”

She raises her hand, and magic flows from her palm, spiralling toward me.

The door opens and I fall back, losing my footing. The magic soars over my head and hits Alma. She's twirled into the hallway, landing on her back, and even from the doorway I can see her body is completely frozen. Shock, and then rage, sears through me.

I lunge for the fae, but Rueven appears on the balcony, his enormous dark wings spread wide. A white light shines from him, blinding me like the morning sun, and then it fades as a strange, spherical object bursts out from its remains.

A metal net crawls out from the object and whirls toward Darcia. She tries to dodge it but the net catches her, ensnaring her like a rabbit in a trap, then it pins her to the ground. She screams the moment the net touches her skin but then her sounds vanish as suddenly the trap disappears, taking Darcia with it.

I sheath the dagger on my thigh, my entire body shaking. "What *was* that thing?"

Rueven marches to me with his face set in a grim line. "Portal."

He grabs my hand and pulls me back to the balcony. "Where did it send her?"

"Back to where she belongs," he snaps, yanking me into his arms. "We've got thirty seconds before she portals back. Hold on."

He leaps over the balcony without giving me so much as a warning. My surprised screams die in the back of my throat as the air is driven swiftly from my lungs. I cling to Rueven's body, pressed so dangerously close to my own, and close my eyes while he takes to the sky.

His wings flap powerfully around us and the warmth from his skin radiates through me, strangely comforting. When I'm ready to open my eyes again, we're already in the clouds, floating among them like we're two stars drifting over a black sea.

Time passes quickly in Rueven's arms. It feels like only minutes when he lowers through the clouds and swoops down over the forest. His wings brush the treetops and rustle the leaves like a silent breeze. He cuts through them and lands smoothly by a clearing, the earth trembling at his arrival. Then everything goes quiet, and his wings, wrapped protectively around me, slowly pull away as he settles me on the ground beside him.

Rueven lifts my chin with surprising tenderness. "We really need to stop meeting like this, Mercy."

A smile teases at my lips, but it's the word mercy that stops it. Reality crashes back down on me like the sky itself and guilt rears its ugly head within me once again. I abandoned everyone. Elias, Lazuri, my friends—their packs. Although I didn't have much of a choice since Rueven just flew away with me, I should've made him leave me behind. Instead I let him rescue me like I was some pathetic little damsel in distress. My blood boils at the thought.

"Why did you bring me here?" I glare up at him, my heart swelling with panic. "We need to go back!"

Rueven stares at me as if I've lost my mind. Maybe I have. It's hard to tell what's real these days.

My heart sinks to the pit of my stomach when he shakes his head.

"This isn't my fight, and if you want to stay alive, Mercy—it's not yours either."

He then walks away from me and not once does he look back. My body trembles with rage as I stand there, alone, glowering at the back of his stupid head. It's then I register the meadow he brought me to and the quaint little cottage surrounded by glowing flowers.

Rueven heads for the cottage and I stomp in that direction after him, my hands clenched into fists at my side. The way I'm feeling, I'll gladly punch some sense into him if I need to.

"Those fae there," I shout at the back of his head, "they came to free you so that does make it your fight, Rueven!"

Rueven!”

He waves his hand, a dismissive gesture that *really* makes me want to punch him, but then the thorns covering the cottage melt away and I realise he was erasing a magical disguise. The door reveals itself and opens before Rueven reaches it. He enters the cottage without a backward glance. I stomp my way inside, refusing to be amazed by the way the lanterns and candles magically illuminate themselves, or how cute and homey the cottage is.

I refuse to acknowledge anything other than the rage boiling inside me.

Rueven strides through the cottage and unlocks the back door with another quick wave of his hand. He steps out into a beautiful, well-maintained garden while I remain fuming in the doorway, watching him draw water from a small stone well. At a distance, this place had looked so eerie and abandoned, but it couldn't be farther from the truth. It must've been put under a magical concealment to hide it from travellers and prevent any trespassers.

Smart, but I'm still too angry to appreciate it. Too confused as to why he'd let innocent people die regardless if they're wolves. I don't want Darcia to be right, but this reaction is only giving her credence, and I hate that. It makes me feel sick that there could be a glimmer of truth in her lies.

I watch Rueven fill two large pails and then carry them to a small wooden tub tucked underneath the kitchen window. He pulls off his shirt, revealing painful-looking bruises on his back and arms, and slowly uses a sponge to carefully wash his body.

In the kitchen window, his reflection shows more bruising on his chest and burn marks from where the iron shackles had been. He's healed better since leaving the dungeon, but his injuries still look painful, and I almost can't believe Elias is responsible for them.

Or at least, his wolves are.

I don't know who tortured Rueven but whoever did clearly enjoyed his suffering.

My anger drains and I uncross my arms, wanting to reach out and hug him instead of punching him. I can't blame Rueven for not wanting to fight for the very wolves who captured, starved, and beat him all these weeks. I even understand why he doesn't want to show them mercy. I doubt I'd show it to Alferis and Bane if I ever got to see them again. But I can't just leave Elias and the others to die, not like... not like with Kris. I can't lose them too.

"Rueven..." I say his name softly, trying to hold back the desperation mounting within me, but it seeps through every syllable. Time is fleeting. Every second could be a life spared if we left now. "You have every right to hate Elias. What he did to you was cruel and vicious, and I'd probably hate him too if I were in your shoes. But don't let your hatred for him condemn his whole pack. You're better than that. Your people are too."

He pauses, the sponge hovering over his left shoulder. Muscles flex in his back when he continues washing himself.

"They're not my people," he says with a tinge of bitterness laced in his voice. "They didn't come to free me either. They came for my head, and they would have succeeded this time had you not warned me." He looks over his shoulder and winks at me, that playful look returning to his eyes again for just a moment. "Consider your debt to me paid for now, Mercy."

He drops the sponge into the water and heads back inside without a backward glance.

I follow him through to the living room. Pulling on a loose grey shirt, he plops down onto a big furry cushion and sighs, his bones no doubt relieved to have something soft to cushion them again. I sit on the velvet chair across from him, next to the fireplace, and hold the satchel in my lap. The fire crackles in the background while Rueven takes a moment to soak in his freedom. The clock on the mantle ticks away, mimicking my racing heartbeat.

I want to let him enjoy this moment but I need answers.

“Who were those fae fighting for if not for you?”

Rueven peels one eye open to look at me, reminding me of the way he'd look and smirk at me in the dungeon. “You already know the answer to that.”

“Darcia?”

He nods. “The very one. She no doubt gave you her usual spiel about how I killed millions of innocent people and burned a village – no, a whole *city* – to the ground, right?” I nod, finding I have nothing to say since he's right. She said exactly those things. “And do you think she was telling the truth?”

I pause in my reply, genuinely considering the possibility once again. But I just can't see it. I shake my head. “I think she was possibly trying to trick me, like you said she would, for that necklace around your neck. What is it, anyway?”

He pauses as if contemplating whether to tell me the truth. “Let's just say I'd be dead without it,” he says, then he sweeps a hand around the room, clearly wanting me to drop the subject. I don't push him; he's been through enough.

“This cottage belongs to me. I used to come here to get away from my family and all the royal bullshit. I haven't visited in decades, but the land is still safe, protected by powerful enchantments not even my father can remove. Not unless I'm dead.” He slides me a grin. “And I still have no intention of dying anytime soon, Mercy, despite your friends' efforts.” I don't return his smile. How they treated Rueven was cruel, and I won't be letting go of it easily. “We'll be safe here until we can move on.”

I grip the satchel in my lap, pressing my nails into the leather. “When will that be?”

“Probably in a few days' time. As soon as things have calmed down.”

I shoot up from the chair. “We can't just stay here.” He follows my movement with narrowed eyes. “My friends are

out there fighting for their lives. I'd rather fight with them than hide here like a coward. I'd rather die!"

Rueven's features twist into a grimace in the firelight. "You would die for them, would you? Why? Why do you care what happens to them? You claimed to be as much their prisoner as I was."

"That's not — it's because — it's because they're my mates!" I blurt out, scarcely comprehending the words myself until they leave my lips and a dead silence stretches between us. I didn't mean to say that. Stars above, I haven't even admitted it to myself yet. Not fully. But now I've said it out loud and I can't take it back.

I watch Rueven's expression closely, hoping now he will understand why those stupid alphas mean something to me. Stars above, I barely understand it all myself, but I know that deep down there's a part of me that calls out for them whenever I'm not near them. It's like the wolf trapped within me is finally waking up, and she needs them—as infuriating as they are—as much as they need her.

"I thought your kind no longer had fated mates," Rueven says after a long, tense moment. "I was told the bonds died out."

"We were told that too. I still don't quite believe it myself, but what I do know, what I do believe in, is that back there in those mountains I found a place I could finally call my home. A place that, no matter how crazy this sounds, felt whole and *just right* with you in it. So if you can't help them, Rueven, then help me. Help the girl who found a piece of home with you in the darkest dungeon. You owe me too."

He stares at me for a long while before standing. "Fine. I will show them mercy because of *you*." Relief keeps me upright as he walks to me while twisting an emerald ring off his finger. "Wear this at all times. It will help you find me should I be taken prisoner again." He slides the ring slowly onto my left index finger, my body tingling just from his touch. The gold band has an inscription on it but I'm not able

to make it out. “It belonged to my mother,” he says, his eyes flicking to mine. “Keep it for me until I return.”

I nod, struggling to say anything in return. The fact this ring belonged to his mother makes it oddly precious to me. It’s only when Rueven pulls away and opens the front door do I find my voice again but it comes out small, quiet, almost like a plea.

“Rune...” He looks back at me, the moonlight making his skin glow again. “Please try not to get taken prisoner again.”

He smirks, his eyes glowing. “I’ll try, Mercy, if you try to stay out of trouble. Deal?”

I smile at him. “Deal.”

The door closes and from the window I watch him fly away. Soon he’s lost in the clouds and I step back, looking around the room again. A horrible silence grows around me now that he’s gone. It crawls over the cottage like an invisible veil, growing tighter with every beat of my heart. I stand completely still and wrap my arms around myself. What was I thinking? I should have gone with him. Maybe I could’ve used my power to help—harnessed it somehow?

At least then I’d be useful. I’d be fighting for those I care about instead of hiding here in the shadows waiting for a glimmer of light.

I rummage through every room, opening all the drawers, cupboards, anything I can get my hands on to distract my thoughts and keep them from spiralling. But the silent veil of dread tightens around me until I’m barely able to breathe.

Every worst-case scenario plays through my head. What if Rueven was too late? What if he’s killed? What if Elias failed to evacuate the pack? What if they were all slaughtered and once again lost everything?

I lost Kris, and for all I know, I lost Mera too. I don’t want to lose my mates.

My mates...

I've never really thought about them like that. Not in the way they have with me, anyway. Not truly. But this pain in my chest—this sharp, burning stabbing sensation in my heart whenever I think about losing them—screams that they are my mates. They always have been. I've just been too afraid to admit it.

A gust of wind sweeps over the cottage, rustling the trees outside. Rueven. I hurry to the window and peer through, my breath fogging up the glass from the sudden cold. My stomach tenses and the hairs rise on the back of my neck when I see only darkness. I wait several moments, searching for any signs of Rueven. What if he's been hurt?

I rush to the door and twist the handle. A magical barrier ripples in front of me when I touch it and shoots an electric shock up my arm. I gasp and pull away from it. He did say the enchantments are so powerful that not even the king of fae can get through them.

Shaking away the tingling sensation in my hand, I look down at the ring. He also said I could use this to find him. But how do I do that? I twist the band but nothing shows up, only my reflection. Then a cloud of black smoke bursts out from the fireplace and I immediately pull out my dagger, coughing from all the dust. A raven flies toward me and then Darcia appears. She looks slightly beaten up compared to when we last met. Her dress is muddy and torn, her hair is wet, and blood trickles from her brow down her cheeks.

“What's wrong, fae? Is your little rebellion not going as planned?”

Her eyes flick around the room, searching for Rueven. She almost looks...afraid. I'd be afraid too if I were in her shoes. I'd also be lying if I said I wasn't the least bit afraid too.

I thought Rueven said no one could get through his enchantments.

“How did you find me?”

That familiar smirk returns to her face again. “The prince isn't as powerful as he once used to be. It appears someone has

been weakening him lately. Distracting him.” She steps forward but stops when I tighten my grip on the dagger, still holding it out between us. “Look. I know you want nothing more than to kill me right now. I get it. But we don’t have time. We need to leave here before Rueven gets back.”

I glare at her. “Why would I go with you? You attacked my mates, froze my friend, and tried to kill me. And before you give your little ‘Rueven is the monster’ spiel again, save it for someone stupid enough to believe you. The only monster here is you and the vicious people in this world just like you.”

Her smirk vanishing, Darcia takes a step. “If you won’t believe me then why don’t we make a deal? Let me prove to you I’m telling the truth and I’ll call off the attack.” The tip of my dagger presses against her chest, but she doesn’t flinch, not even when a small droplet of blood trickles down from the blade. “Or we can waste time fighting here and you’ll never find out the truth. Not just about Rueven, but about you and your past. About Mera.”

The mention of Mera’s name takes me by surprise the most. “How do you know about—”

“Because it’s my job to know. I know where she is just like I know where your father is. He’s the one who sent me here to bring you home. Still don’t believe me?” She holds out her hand, revealing a black coin with a raven on it resting in the middle of her palm. “Mera told me to give you this. She said you’d know what to do with it.”

I blink down at the coin, scarcely able to believe my own eyes. It’s the lucky coin Mera always carried with her. She kept it tucked in her pocket at all times, and whenever it was a full moon, she’d kiss the raven and say it would bring us good luck. It never brought us much luck but it did give the three of us hope.

Keeping my dagger pressed to her, I take the coin with my other hand and press its centre to my lips, thoughts of a father I’ve never known playing through my mind. A red raven appears with its wings on fire. It flies out from the coin and around my body before disappearing into thin air, leaving only

the smell of fire behind. I know this is a message from Mera but I don't understand why she left it. So many more questions fill my mind, and it's the fae in front of me who seemingly holds all the answers.

“If I go with you, you'll call off the attack?”

Darcia dips her head. “That's my end of the deal. Yours is coming with me to find out the truth.”

I clench my fingers around the coin, both my hands shaking. I don't want to leave. The last thing I want to do is abandon Elias and Lazuri. And Rueven, who's out there risking his life for me. But if I go with Darcia now then they'll all be saved. So many lives could be spared while I finally find answers to the questions I've been searching for my whole life.

Who am I and where do I belong in this world? Why did my parents abandon me?

I lower my arm, nodding at her. “I'll only go with you if you tell me the truth *now*.”

Darcia glowers at me but nods once. “You already know you're half fae. What you don't know is that your father is a powerful fae lord, and your mother was a stray wolf who turned out to be his fated mate. Together, they united many of their kind, fae and wolves alike, and for a while the realms lived in peace. Until...”

Darcia pauses as my heart freezes in place. Her eyes fill with unshed tears. “Until word spread too far about the new pack, and Rueven was sent to destroy us before we grew too big. Too powerful.” A single tear slides its way down her cheek. She doesn't bother to wipe it away. “Some of us managed to escape. Me. You. Mera. Your father. A handful of others. But he killed most of the pack, including your mother. He's the reason you lost everything.”

I fall back against the wall, sickness rising in my throat as one thing repeats over and over in my mind. When I saw into Rueven's mind, I couldn't understand how it was possible he saw me as a baby. Now I know why. Rueven had just

slaughtered my pack. If what Darcia says is true, then he wasn't protecting me at all.

He was hunting me.

It was a nightmare *and* a memory after all.

The only reason I survived was because my mother reached the mortal realm before he could finish his job. I remember the hesitation he felt when he saw me, but maybe that hadn't been mercy. Maybe he'd just grown tired of killing for one night.

Maybe he really is the monster in all this.

"My father..." I hear myself say as a single tear burns its way down my cheek. "Where is he?"

"He's—"

Darcia stops mid-sentence. Her whole body stiffens as black mist crawls over her and smothers her skin until she's completely frozen, then with a strangled gasp, she falls to the floor, shattering into pieces.

Rueven appears behind her. Darkness fills the room as he walks slowly toward me, prowling almost, as he bends and melts the shadows around him with every step. His face is void of emotion but there's an intensity burning in his eyes that makes me take a step back from him.

"I told you to never trust a fae, Verena. You should have listened."

He digs his fingers into my arm and pulls me to my feet, dragging me outside with him.

Then he leaps into the sky again, just like he did on the balcony.

Except this time he isn't my ally.

He's my enemy...

[CONTINUING Reading with These Vicious Fae...](#)



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**SHADOWBORN
ACADEMY BONUS READ..**

CHAPTER ONE

The moonlight bleeding through the trees create flickering shadows that dance around me. I should be afraid of them like all the other children are, but I'm not. These shadows are safe. They're not like the ones watching me from the treetops, waiting to snatch me off the ground.

No, these shadows are different.

They're my friends.

The faeries hiding in them follow me like they always do when I come into the Enchanted Forest. I can't see them but I can hear them giggling and whispering in my ear. They flick my dark curly hair over my shoulders and play with the ribbons on my light blue dress, then the frills of my white socks with the little bunny rabbits on them. It's their way of saying hello and it makes me giggle as I skip through the forest, humming to the song Mama always sings to me before I go to sleep.

Mama and Papa warned me not to follow these faeries. They said they're not like the rest and I'll be in deep trouble if I ever go out to play after dark. That's when the faeries come out. They sing to children like me and promise us things beyond our wildest dreams, but nobody ever sees them again once they follow the faeries into the forest. Mama said it's because they gobble them up for supper. I don't believe her. I mean, how horrible would that be? I don't think we taste very nice.

Pitch said the real reason the children don't come back is magical.

He told me that they grow wings and go to live with the faeries. He said I can do that, too, once I make my wish. I'm so excited. I can hear him singing to me and I start humming along to his favourite song, the one about the raven and the wishing well. I follow his voice, excited to play with him again and eat snacks and tell each other stories. No one else can see

or hear Pitch apart from me and the faeries. Although we're the same age, he doesn't look like any of the boys from my village. He's extremely pale with glowing amber eyes and long ebony hair that sways around him like the shadows do in here. I know he's different and that's why I like him.

That's why I'm following him.

Now that it's my eighth birthday, Pitch is going to let me make a wish in the well he sings about. He says only special humans—the chosen ones—get to make a wish here. Sometimes he says funny things like that and I don't understand him. All I want is a pair of shiny blue shoes, the same ones as my dolly. Pitch says the faeries are going to give me them and then I'll finally have the same outfit as my little dolly.

The faeries guide me to the edge of a clearing which is bright from the moonlight shining down. I wave goodbye to them, even though I can't see where they are, then I continue humming and skipping after Pitch.

I can see him now, sitting on top of the well, and my heart soars as I race through the clearing. Once I reach the well, he lifts me onto the stone with him. It's wide enough that the two of us can stand together without falling into the hole.

"It's time to make your wish," he says, and my stomach fills with butterflies. "Are you ready to be born again?" I don't know what he means by that; I just want the lovely shoes. I nod anyway, and Pitch smiles at me. "Then close your eyes."

When I do this, I hold my breath, too excited to breathe.

My heart feels like it's going to burst out from my chest. I feel dizzy and sick and excited.

"Do you remember what we talked about?" Pitch asks quietly. "What you do once you make your wish? It's very important that you don't forget that part."

"I won't forget," I tell him firmly, peeking through my eyelashes. "Can I say it now? Can I make my wish?"

He giggles and lets go of my hand. "Go on, Corvina. Make your wish and make it count."

I let out an excited squeal, then I scrunch up my little face and think really hard because I don't want to mess this up.

—Hello faeries! Please can I have the same shoes as my dolly? You know, the sparkly blue shoes with the pretty bows on the silver buckles? I would like them very much. Thank you.

With my wish uttered, I open my eyes. Pitch is gone just like he said he would be and I'm alone on the well. I look down into the tunnel of darkness stretching before me. A loose pebble falls away from the edge and drops into the well. It takes forever to splash through the water at the bottom, and I gulp, my palms turning sweaty against my dress.

For my wish to come true, I need to go down there.

Pitch said he'll be waiting for me and that the faeries will even give me wings so that I don't hurt myself. I'll be just like the other children who followed the faeries into the woods and lived happily ever after. Maybe I'll even be able to see my friends, Bella, and Michael and Agnes.

We'll all be faeries together, like we used to talk about.

I turn around and spread my arms out like wings, smiling at the thought of seeing my friends from school again. Taking a deep breath and holding it in my chest, I close my eyes and fall down into the well, praying that Mama and Papa were wrong about the faeries, and about Pitch, the monster hiding under my bed...

Before I plunge to my death, I wake up with a gasp for air, crutching my thin bedsheets in my hands. Pitch wasn't waiting for me. There was nothing but pain and misery at the bottom of that stupid well and my innocent ass didn't know any better back then.

I fell into magical darkness, and as everyone here tells me, that's when I became a shadowborn.

But that's not the part that haunts me every night in my dreams. Oh, no. It's what happened after the pain and misery—after I drowned in all the magical water, my eight-year-old body absorbing it like it was sugar and I was a starving kid.

When my heart started beating again and I opened my eyes, I lay floating on my back as the moon drew closer and closer to me. I remember crying and thinking I had been turned into a bug instead of a faery, but it was just the water healing my shattered bones and floating me up to the surface.

The second my feet touched the earth again, my power exploded and I destroyed everything in a five-mile radius, including all the people in the houses.

Including my parents.

And the only living thing was me, covered in ash, lying on the forest floor as the sun rose into a blood-red sky.

Talk about a birthday to remember.

After that, I was picked up by the Shadow Wardens, protectors of the magical world, and thrown in a shadowborn foster home with all the other children that are like me. Only they didn't kill hundreds of people and not one of them in here see their powers like the curse it really is.

“You having those dreams again?” Sage asks, sitting up on her bed next to me and staring at me, the moonlight highlighting her beige skin, curly pink hair that isn't at all messy even though she just woke up. Sage Millhouse is the only bit of this foster home that I've ever cared about and I'm certain it's the same way for her. We came here on the same day, two scared kids who wanted nothing more than to escape this hellhole and the new powers we have. Sage got her power the way most of the kids here did, by being bitten by a shadowborn in their animal state. One bite is enough to infuse any soul with shadow magic, and all it took for Sage was a bite from a fox in her garden.

The fox was never seen again, and Sage nearly died, only to survive and be taken from her parents to come and live here.

The foster home is full of those stories, and it's the main reason I don't talk about my past.

“Always.”

It's all I need to say for Sage to get off her bed and head out of the room. I follow her, the old wooden floorboards

creaking under my barefeet with each step. Sage holds the timber door open and we head outside into the garden. The cool air is refreshing for only a second before it's nothing but cold nipping at my skin.

“Ready?” I ask her as I stare up, the darkness and shadows comforting me like they always do.

Sage doesn't reply, though I'm unsurprised as she isn't one for words. That's why I like her. I watch her bright purple eyes as she disappears in a cloud of black smoke. The darkness. It's become a blanket of sorts to people like us. As the blackness fades away, there is nothing more than a hawk sitting on the ground, its lavender eyes staring up at me. I grin as I close my own silver eyes and do the next best thing in the world.

I let the darkness take me, creating me into something more.

Something so much better than I already am.

My body disappears into the darkness but my mind always stays, loving the comfort as I shift into a raven and follow Sage into the skies of Blackpool.

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