



CURSED MATE

FERAL SHIFTERS BOOK 3

CALLIE ROSE

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CALLIE ROSE NEWSLETTER

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AMORA

MY HEART IS LODGED in my throat, heavy and choking. Hot tears sting my eyes, blurring the scene unfolding before me. I hold my breath, fists clenched against my knees as I kneel only inches away from Frost's deathly still form.

Kian grunts with the effort of doing chest compressions. His messy chestnut hair swings wildly around his rugged face as his body heaves above Frost's with each compression. Arms taut, muscles bulging, he looks so much more massive than Frost's lithe, slender form. Like one wrong move will break the smaller man beyond recovery.

Or maybe I feel that way because I know he's dead.

No, I snarl at myself, tightening my fingers until my nails dig painfully into my palms. The sharp sting grounds me to the here and now, and I try to drag my thoughts away from the black pit that threatens to consume them, reminding myself that there's still hope.

He's not dead. Not yet.

At least... I hope not.

Frost's shadow marks—those dark, swirling, tattoo-like patterns that cover his body—are still moving. Sluggishly, but still, they *are* moving. I have no idea if that's a good thing or not, since his shadows are a separate part of his consciousness. Like a parasite that lives inside him. Inside all of them.

If he had died, would they be dead, too? Or would they continue to feed off him like a virus?

For all of our sakes, I hope it's the former, because it's the one thing I'm clinging to right now. I'm not letting that tiny hope go. If the shadows on his skin are still moving, that means he hasn't been taken from me yet.

“Come on,” Kian growls. Even roughened and strained as it is now, his voice is still like whiskey and woodsmoke, the deep sound much more reassuring to me than I want it to be.

Not too long ago, he was my enemy. The one man in all the world I hated enough that if he’d died, I would’ve danced on his fucking grave. Hell, my only goal in life was to send him to that grave myself. I avoided whiskey for years because I couldn’t stand the way it reminded me of him.

And now...

Now, I don’t know. I don’t know what we are to each other, but I know I don’t want him to die, any more than I want Frost to die. I need him to live. I need all three of my onetime mates to live, in spite of everything they did to me and all the bad blood that’s passed between us.

Maybe we still haven’t healed from their betrayal on that mountaintop, when they severed the bond between us like they were cutting away a burr. But the possibility is there, I think. One day.

Things do change.

Just like people do die.

I clench my teeth and take a deep breath, trying to get ahold of my emotions. The mountain breeze has dissipated, leaving the cold night air sitting heavy on my bare skin. The trees around us seem dangerous and too still, full of darkness and shadows.

Maybe even shadows that could hurt us.

I never used to fear the dark as a little girl, but now I know that some monsters which lurk in the shadows are all too real.

“Frost!” Kian snarls, his breath huffing out on the name. A swirl of white fog emanates from his lips as he speaks. “Come on, goddammit. Stay with me.”

His own smoky tattoos wave erratically, twisting and twining up his arms as his muscles twitch and jolt from the effort. I’ve never seen his shadows move like that; it’s a stark, visible show of his emotions.

Kian isn’t the type to let his emotions rule his actions or body. The very fact that he is now terrifies me, threatening to snuff out the tiny spark of hope that still lives in my chest.

Malix’s tattoos aren’t as wild as Kian’s, but they’re moving too. He kneels at Frost’s head, his dark hands contrasting starkly with Frost’s abnormally pale face and even paler hair. He watches Kian work with hooded violet eyes, his usually good-natured expression broken. Dazed. Despairing.

The look on his face stabs me right in the heart. Right in the place where our mate bond used to reside. Now, it's only a gaping void that feels like it'll never be whole again.

The three of them may have cut their metaphysical tie to me in some stupid, cruelly heroic attempt to keep me safe, but the bond between each of these men is as strong as ever. They're all so close. Inseparable, really, like three parts of a whole that won't survive without all its pieces. Frost is an essential part of who they are.

If he doesn't make it...

I swallow in a vain attempt to shove down my tears. I shift closer on my knees, wishing I could touch Frost. Wishing he'd open his eyes. Wishing I had told him how I really feel about him before I lost the chance forever.

And still, his tattoos, the external marker of the magic that makes him a feral shifter, continue to wave in agonizingly slow motion.

Fury creeps in at the edges of my thoughts. *Quinton* did this to him. Frost's old alpha pushed too much shadow magic into him. More than he could handle until it overwhelmed him. The sound of Frost's agonized scream has continued to replay in my head over and over since we escaped Quinton's pack, fighting for our lives and leaving several bodies scattered in our wake as we raced off through the forest.

Even worse than the scream was the look of pure, raw agony on Frost's face. But maybe the agony was better than the blank, slack, *dead* look he wears now.

Quinton stopped his heart.

Quinton killed him.

And I'm going to kill Quinton if it's the last fucking thing I do.

"Frost!" Kian growls again, his tone a frantic mix of anger and fear. "Wake up. We need you! Come back to us."

The way his large hands compress Frost's bare chest makes bile rise in my throat. Frost's skin gives under the force of it like soft clay, making him look like a silicone dummy rather than a man. How is this not breaking his rib cage? Bruising his organs?

How can he come back from this?

Malix closes his eyes and bows his head as if in prayer, still cradling Frost's head in his lap. Sweat beads at his dark hairline, reminding me that we just sprinted miles and miles to get away from Quinton and the rest of his pack.

My arms are tired and feel like jelly. Not because I had to race wildly across the landscape, but because I had to keep my dying mate from slipping off Kian's back during the journey.

I can't help myself. I reach out and brush my fingers over Frost's bare thigh. He's so cold. *Too* cold. The kind of cold that only comes as the oxygen fades and the blood chills.

And I can't do anything to warm him.

Not too long ago, I wanted Frost dead. I wanted all three of them dead, and I planned to do it myself to save the world from a witch's apocalyptic premonition.

You have not one mate, but three.

And they will destroy the world.

All those months, two years' worth of months, where I chased them down, desperate to put a stop to their chaos. It was my all-consuming goal for so long.

Except now... now I know better. I know they're good men. Or at least, not evil. I know they're capable of love because they love each other. I know they're capable of empathy and goodness because they've shown me the truth. I would move heaven and earth to change fate, if it means they survive.

All of them.

My stomach twists around itself like a snake, cramping with worry. I leave my fingers resting on Frost's leg as his body shakes beneath Kian's palms.

The idea of him dying tears me apart inside.

“Frost!” Kian roars, his face twisting with emotion. The jagged scar that bisects his eyebrow is pale white and mottled red, and it knots with his pained grimace. He looks like a warrior whose partner has fallen in battle. He moves faster, presses harder, and his breaths become shallower.

Like a man possessed.

Or a brother lost.

Malix reaches out to put his hand over Kian's. “That's enough. It's done.”

“No!” I blurt the word on a gasp, my entire body turning cold. The tears that have been threatening to spill over finally do, wetting my lashes and my cheeks. A small sob slips from me, and I squeeze Frost's leg to ground myself.

Fuck. Fuck. Oh god. *Fuck.* This is it. He's not going to make it.

I think of Frost standing in Erik's private library. We killed the solitary

witch for trying to sell us out to Felicity, Quinton's estranged mate, then we searched his house for anything that could help us on our quest to neutralize the shadow poison that was killing us both. Frost looked like he was formed from the dark and shadows in that room, his pale blond hair a spot of brightness as he pulled books from shelves. He opened up to me that night about the pain they feel carrying shadow magic around all the time. He showed me how intelligent he was, how quick he was with strategy.

He told me how being near me eased his constant ache.

And then, after I tracked them to their pack lands and was captured by Quinton, he saved my life. Without a second thought. Without hesitation. He threw himself against Quinton's gun to keep him from putting a bullet in me, effectively severing ties with his alpha.

For me.

Another sob wracks my body. I lean over and press my face to his cold, pale skin and give in to my tears.

But then Kian lets out a harsh, triumphant cry.

I bolt upright, my eyes flying wide.

Frost drags in a harsh, almost pained gasp of air. He stirs slightly, his fingers twitching. Then he coughs and sucks in another breath.

My own heart seems to stop, the air freezing in my lungs as I stare at him in disbelief.

Kian did it.

He brought him back.

Relief floods me so strongly that my limbs feel rubbery. Chest aching from unshed tears and a gratitude that I can't even articulate, I crawl up next to Kian to lean over Frost. I want to be close to him. To watch him come back to us.

His icy blue eyes flutter open in increments, as if he's surfacing from a heavy sleep. He pulls in another deep, ragged breath, grimacing. One hand drifts to his chest like he's in pain. I can't say I'm surprised, given how hard Kian was pumping his heart. He has to have a broken rib or two, or at least several bruised ones. For a moment, Frost's eyes are unfocused, his brows pulled together as he tries to gain his bearings.

Then his gaze shifts to me.

We lock eyes, and my heart jumps in my chest. Recognition crosses his face, mixed with the lingering confusion that still hovers there. His expression softens, chasing away the dazed look with something almost like

love.

Oh, thank God.

He's still himself. He still knows me. The relief is almost painful, and happy tears burn hot in my eyes. I can't find my voice, but I manage to mouth his name. *Frost*.

I want to blurt out words that I would never consider saying under normal circumstances. The truth of how I feel about him, how deeply he's embedded himself in my heart, mate bond or no. I want to tell him I owe him everything, that I owe him the rest of my life for saving me.

But then everything changes in a split second.

The tenderness melts away from his features, the softness draining from his blue eyes. His expression contorts, turning vicious. One moment, his angular, aristocratic features are soft and loving, then the next, he's a monster.

Snarling with fury, he surges up from the ground—lunging right for me.

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KIAN

WHAT THE FUCK?

Frost lunges at Amora, and shock explodes inside me, cutting through my relief. I react instantly, moving faster than I can think as I reach out and shove her sideways with all my strength. She sprawls awkwardly into the dirt, arms and legs akimbo, but out of Frost's attack path.

Frost slams into me instead.

I absorb the blow on my left shoulder, latching on to his arms as we go down, even as we hit the ground so hard it rattles my teeth. Twisting around, I throw Frost to the ground instead, using his own momentum to get him down. I follow him, landing on top of him to try to pin him. He thrashes violently, inhuman noises coming from deep inside his chest. Snatching at his wrists, I get a grip on him and slam him to the grass and dirt, one knee slanted over his thighs to hold him down.

Malix jumps in to help, but Frost begins to buck as madly as a wild mustang. His shadows flicker and convulse all over him, the shadow magic fueling him from the inside. Despite the fact that I started out with the upper hand, I quickly lose control of his limbs.

He backhands me across the face with the full force of his body behind the blow. I hurtle sideways and hit the grass, barely able to catch myself on both hands. I land awkwardly, my arm twisting under me so that I go down hard on the same shoulder Frost barreled into seconds ago. My vision goes black for a split second from his punch, and when I finally shake it off, Frost is shifting to his shadow wolf form.

Malix's hands wrap around my biceps, and he hauls me to my feet. He keeps one hand on me, steadyng me, as we both watch Frost's transition with

growing horror.

Shadows spill around his body like liquid smoke. He morphs larger. And then *larger*. Even larger than he was before Quinton overloaded him with shadow magic. He looks more like a horse than a wolf. Like a goddamn Clydesdale. Long limbs of rippling muscles, a barrel chest big enough to take down trees, and a vicious snout large enough to bite through my own shadow wolf head.

Our shadow wolf forms are already massive, deadly weapons, but he's on a whole new level now.

Worse than the physical damage that's been done to him, something feels different about him. The three of us have always been close—closer than normal pack mates, so deeply connected that it's as if we each hold a piece of the other's soul. And I can feel a change in him through the bond we share, as if the essence of what made him Frost has been irrevocably broken.

He's drowning in darkness. Too deep for me to reach.

His shadows have taken over, filling him with nothing but rage, pain, and fury.

Malix curses under his breath as the shift completes, releasing his grip on my arm as we stare up at our brother.

"Well," he mutters. "That's new."

Ignoring his ridiculous attempt at levity, I flick my gaze toward Amora. "Run. Now."

She's still on the ground where I knocked her away, looking shocked and fearful, which isn't an expression I'm used to on such a badass woman. For once, she doesn't question me. She darts to her feet, as graceful as a deer, her skin pale against the backdrop of the dark forest. With a single leap, she shifts to her wolf form before she hits the ground. Her dark brown fur helps conceal her as she flees over the flat terrain, skirting around trees.

Frost's attention snaps to her, drawn by the movement, but we don't give him a chance to react. My shadows shift restlessly, itching for a fight, and I let them loose. Magic pours over my body, stretching ligaments and tendons, lengthening my limbs, and filling me with the buzz of shadow energy. Before the shift has fully completed, I'm on top of Frost, with Malix right behind me.

I've already figured out that Frost has grown physically from the influx of shadow magic Quinton forced into him, but the *level* of his new strength is much more apparent once I latch on to his scruff. He tosses me off like I

weigh nothing at all, then swings his massive head around into Malix's body like a wrecking ball. We both slam to the ground inches apart and scramble back to our feet.

Frost! I call out in mind speak, darting ahead of him to try to catch his gaze. I need to restore the connection between us. I need to bring him back from the darkness. *Listen to me. Do you rememb—*

He swipes at me with a massive paw. I manage to duck the blow and dance several feet away to consider my next move.

Malix circles around to the opposite side of Frost's heaving form, his head swinging toward me as his lupine eyes meet mine. *Can he hear us?*

Frost lunges at me, and I feint right. When he reacts, I dart left, then roll my body underneath his legs. I slam into his back legs in an attempt to take him down, but he barely even wobbles.

He howls, the sound loud enough to send birds fleeing into the sky from surrounding trees.

I manage to disentangle myself from Frost's stamping paws and roll away.

Fuck. I don't know, I reply to Malix's question, baring my teeth in a snarl. *It doesn't seem like he can.*

Or he just doesn't care, Malix shoots back grimly.

Frost snaps at him, and while our brother's attention is divided between us, I launch myself through the air to go for another takedown.

My teeth snag on to the back of Frost's neck. I yank, but he doesn't go down. At least, not the way I want him to.

Instead, he thrashes wildly, tossing himself to his back.

All the breath in my lungs is forced out as I slam into the dirt with Frost's considerable weight on top of me. I'm too stunned to move, unable to drag another breath into my body. Frost leaps off me, then I hear Malix yelp, followed by the heavy sound of fading steps.

Shit! He's going after Amora! Malix shouts through mind speak.

I'm on my feet in an instant, urgency burning through my veins. I sprint after Frost, not even pausing to make sure Malix is with me.

I don't know how to subdue Frost. He's our brother—I don't want to hurt him. I don't want to break bones or shed blood. But he's fucking *wild*. There's hardly anything consciously human left in him. Coupled with the fact that he's bigger, stronger, and fighting dirty, we're all in danger.

But no matter what, we can't let him hurt Amora.

No more holding back, I tell Malix gruffly as I put on a burst of speed to catch up to Frost. I can see Amora just ahead, running for all she's worth.

Not fast enough, though. Never fast enough to outrun a shadow wolf, and especially not one on goddamn steroids.

Malix's growl echoes in my mind. *Right. No more holding back.*

My paws barely touch the ground. I fly after Frost's larger form, gaining speed on him thanks to the sheer dumb luck of being smaller. A larger size doesn't necessarily equate to greater speed, and for that, I count myself lucky.

Size does, however, mean strength. We need a plan. Fast.

I draw up alongside Malix, both of us only a couple feet behind Frost. The forest spreads out ahead of us toward the distant mountain, the trees thinning out to our left and growing denser to our right.

If we could knock Frost out...

Amora! I shout. *Hard right. Now!*

She doesn't reply, but her lupine form immediately cuts sharply to the right and darts into the thick copse of trees. Where was this blind obedience weeks ago?

Fucking women.

I don't realize I've "spoken" that aloud until Malix snickers and replies, *Can't live with 'em, can't live without 'em.*

You're still on my shit list, I tell him with a growl. *For having sex with her against my command.*

Despite the danger of the situation, Malix still manages to shoot me a tongue-lolling grin. *Twice.*

Amora crashes into the undergrowth, and Frost follows after. His larger size lays waste to the trees and branches, opening up a hole large enough for me and Malix to pass through after them.

The forest floor here is so overgrown that Amora has vanished into the shrubs, which was exactly what I was hoping for. Frost snarls and comes to a sliding halt, sticking his snout in the air to scent her.

We take advantage of his distraction and leap on him.

Malix slams into his shoulders, and I go for the head, teeth latching onto one of Frost's ears. Between us both, we manage to wrestle Frost to the ground, though he begins to thrash like he's having a seizure. I cling to his ear, cringing when I taste fresh blood on my tongue. Frost slams me into the ground twice on a background of feral snarls. Malix scuffles with him, digging his teeth into Frost's throat.

I can't hold on! Malix shouts. *Shit! He's too strong!*

I struggle to get my feet beneath me and shove at Frost's thick skull to pin him to the ground. His hips and lower legs buck and kick. Malix takes a blow to the head and yelps, sailing away into the shadowy undergrowth.

Frost flings me off his bloody ear. I hit the ground hard and brace myself as he lunges. He lands on top of me, fangs bared—

And a dull, hollow *thud* echoes over the night's insect song.

Frost stiffens. Then his eyes roll back into his head, and he collapses to the ground next to me.

Amora stands over us in human form, her chest heaving and a thick tree branch clutched in her hand, the heavy end of it resting on the ground. I know from experience that Amora swings a tree branch like a goddamn Major League baseball player. I had a concussion for days after she did it to me.

Her wide green eyes meet mine, then she looks down at Frost's unconscious body as it slowly shifts to human form. She lets out a little cry that tears my heart wide open. Her fingers convulse and the branch falls to the ground, then she sinks to her knees, looking haunted. Horrified.

I'm not sure what's upsetting her more in this moment—the fact that Frost has turned into a monstrous beast or that she just knocked out a recently resuscitated man.

I grit my teeth. This entire situation is just fucked up.

Malix and I shift back and quickly track down some thick vines to use as makeshift bindings. We wrap Frost's ankles together, then bind his hands behind his back, using some of the handy knot tricks Frost himself taught me. I'm not sure they'll hold if he wakes up, but hopefully Amora hit him hard enough to keep him down for a while.

After checking his pulse and the lump on his head to make sure he's not too badly injured, I stand, brushing my hands free of dirt. Turning away from his sleeping form, I glance down at Amora where she's still kneeling on the ground.

"We need to get going," I say gruffly, averting my gaze so I don't focus too hard on the hurt in her eyes. I already let my emotions get the best of me while Frost was unresponsive and not breathing. I can't go back to that place right now. Shoving my emotions down, I tell Malix, "Get him on my back. I'll carry him."

"You just carried him like fifteen miles," Malix argues.

"And I'll carry him fifteen more," I snarl, glaring at him as my carefully

locked down emotions rage out of control again. “Get him on my back.”

Before he can argue further, I shift to my shadow wolf form and lower to my belly.

Amora scrambles to her feet as Malix leans over to reach for Frost. She hurries around me and goes to Frost’s feet to help lift. After a few moments of him sliding all over my back, they finally get him in a good position, and Malix throws another length of vine around my chest to anchor him in place so that Amora won’t have to sit behind him and hold him steady.

Then Amora and Malix shift back to wolf form, and we’re on the move.

We travel hard, leaving the mountains long before the sun starts to lighten the sky. After a while, we start to pass through farmland, patches of colorful crops and fallow fields dotted by lonesome farmhouses and barns.

Out here, it’s going to be more difficult to find somewhere safe to rest. These houses are occupied by working families, and the first four or five we check out have lights burning and dogs barking inside. So we journey a bit farther, bouncing from house to house as the hazy early morning sky begins to lighten even more. I want us undercover—and Frost locked away for our safety and his—before the rest of the world wakes.

Finally, we come across a two-story white farmhouse with peeling paint and a giant wrap-around porch that’s clearly empty. There are no cars in the drive, no animals in the pens out back, and the barn door swings on creaky hinges in the light breeze. A farm that’s fallen on hard times, maybe, and a family that ended up somewhere else.

Whatever happened here, it makes no difference to me.

Malix and Amora untie the vines securing Frost and pull him off my back, then I shift and walk up the rickety porch stairs to put an elbow through the window beside the door. Glass shatters and rains down at my feet, and I brush away the excess before reaching through to blindly grope for the lock.

One click, and we’re inside.

It’s musty with disuse and smells faintly of mildew, but the furniture is all still here. I pass down a dark hall into the kitchen and poke around in the cabinets—plenty of non-perishables, and the water and electric are both still running.

After one fucking hell of a night, at least luck seems to be favoring us.

Malix joins me in carrying Frost down into the cellar beneath the house. The place is split into two rooms, one with an ancient washer and dryer and all the HVAC hardware, and the other filled with work benches and an array

of tools.

"The hot water heater," I grunt, lifting Frost's shoulders. "The pipes should be strong enough to hold him."

Malix nods, and we manhandle Frost's bulk into the corner next to the water heater. We settle him on the floor as gently as we can, given the fact he's as boneless as a rag doll.

Once Frost is settled on the stone floor, Malix steps back and brushes off his hands.

"I'll find some rope or something," he says quietly, then strides back into the workroom.

I stand stiffly over our brother, staring down at his pale form. A massive bruise is forming just above his right temple, and his shadows jerk and wave irritably all over his naked body.

He was *dead*. The excess shadows Quinton forced into his body destroyed him like parasites from the inside. He had no heartbeat. The warmth was fading from his skin.

It's a fucking miracle he's alive.

Fury floods through me in a sudden rush. But in this moment, it's not directed outward. It's all directed inward. At myself.

This is my fault. I have *one* job as the oldest of the three of us, and that's to keep my brothers safe. I should have been the one to stop Quinton from shooting Amora. I should have protected Frost, should've demanded that Quinton do that shadow shit on *me* instead.

But I let Frost down.

I've let them all down.

Even Amora.

Anger, despair, grief, hate... all of those emotions barrel into me at once. I can't control them, just like Frost wasn't able to control his wild, feral tendencies when he woke up. I feel like I'm about to burst out of my own skin, like all the rage in my chest is going to transform into a physical thing and tear me apart.

I can't be in this room anymore. I can barely stand to be in my own body.

So I turn around and stalk past Amora, who's standing silently by the open door. I avoid her gaze, and I avoid Malix's questioning look as I pass through the work room to the staircase.

I bound up the stairs and out of the house before I boil over and burn it all to the ground.

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AMORA

KIAN STALKS UP THE STAIRS, his footsteps so heavy I'm afraid he's going to fall right through the thin wooden planks. I stare after him, a sick feeling churning in my stomach.

Something clanks over by the benches. I swing my attention back to Malix as he draws a long length of rusted chain out of a wooden crate. He hefts it in his hands over the sound of Kian's fading footsteps. Clearly, he's not the least bit bothered or worried by the way his brother just stalked out.

I glance up at the ceiling overhead as it creaks beneath Kian's weight. A moment later, the front door slams shut so hard it almost shakes the entire house.

Malix crosses to me, the chain dangling from one hand and a few pieces of hardware gripped in the other. He stops a foot away from me, shooting a glance up at the ceiling as he rolls a carabiner in between his thumb and forefinger.

"He's fucked up right now," he says, his full lips pulling to one side in a grimace. "He gets like this sometimes. Nothing to do but let him deal."

I snort. "Somehow, I don't think his method of 'dealing' is very healthy."

Malix leans in and presses a quick, chaste kiss to my lips. "Kitty, nothing Kian does is healthy. You just gotta let him fall apart. He'll pull himself back together afterward."

As quick as it was, my lips still tingle from his kiss, and for a second, I can almost forget all the bad stuff. I have a wild impulse to grab Malix before he walks away and make him kiss me even more thoroughly. Maybe we could lose ourselves in each other for a while. It certainly worked the last two times.

But then my gaze drifts to Frost's unconscious form. No part of me wants to leave his side, not until he wakes up and I'm sure he's okay. I hit him *hard*, and clearly, something is wrong inside him. Something to do with the overburdening of shadows Quinton put on him. He's like a balloon too full of air and on the verge of bursting.

He needs me. He needs us.

Obviously, though, Kian is upset too. When a man who doesn't usually show his emotions appears to suddenly be drowning in them, there's no way to deny that something is desperately wrong.

Motioning with my chin toward the stairs Kian went up, I say, "Should I go check on him?"

Malix shrugs, striding back over to the water heater. "Up to you."

"Nobody should have to pull themselves back together without a friend. Not after what we just went through."

He drops the chains next to Frost's splayed legs and squats down to check the pulse in his neck. "You don't really believe that. How long were you solo, dealing with your own shit, 'pulling yourself back together' when things got tough?"

"Fair point," I hedge. Still, the thought of Kian out there in the cool early morning feeling some kind of shitty way makes my stomach roll uncomfortably. "Maybe that's why I care, though. Maybe I'm tired of being alone with my feelings, especially now that I know it's better to have company."

"Kian has never been one for company."

"Which is probably why he almost spontaneously combusted trying to revive Frost," I point out.

Malix's deft hands, which have been poking and prodding at Frost's still form, drop back to his knees, and he glances over at me with a smirk, his white teeth gleaming against his dark skin. "Guess I can't argue that one."

I bit my lip, shifting my gaze to the sleeping man at his side. "How is he?"

"I think he's going to be okay," Malix assures me, then reaches for the chains. "Just a bump on the head. No broken bones that I can see. He's had worse."

Like the poison we both survived.

And being dead only a couple hours ago.

The reminder of both of those awful things, and how difficult he's had it

lately, makes me want to forget Kian and go sit by Frost's side forever. But I *can't* forget Kian. I can't shove him out of my heart no matter how many times I've tried, and even though he's not even in the house anymore, it's as if I can still feel his pain hovering in the air around us.

Malix winds the chain around Frost's wrists, then tosses it over the pipe several feet above his head. Frost leans against the wall, his chin lolling on his chest as his brother secures the chain in place with a clever combination of carabiners and zip ties.

"You go do what you need to, kitty," Malix says, as if he's somehow read my thoughts and can sense the conflict raging in my chest. "I'll look out for Frost. I'll make sure he's safe and as comfortable as he can be. He'll be okay."

My heart clenches uncomfortably as I gaze down at Frost's sleeping face. He looks so innocent, even with those black shadow marks racing madly over his body. I want to curl up next to him and keep him warm, to hold him until the shadows calm.

But I can't do anything for him right now. He's got Malix to keep him comfortable. All he can do is sleep off the concussion. The moment he awakes, I'll be there for him.

For now, I can be there for Kian.

"I'll be back," I tell Malix and head for the stairs.

"Be careful," Malix warns, glancing over his shoulder at me. "He's not himself when he's upset."

Pausing at the doorway, I smile sadly back at him. "Who is?"

I make my way through the empty house and out the front door, the screen door slapping loudly behind me as I step onto the deck. The sun is coming up over the plains, illuminating the fields and the few visible houses in the near distance. I hurry off the porch and lift my nose to the air to scent for Kian. The last thing we need is for a nosy neighbor to see people at the abandoned house and to call the cops while we still have an unconscious man chained in the basement.

Not to mention that, for the moment, we're still all running around buck ass naked. While that's not abnormal in the shifter world, the humans have a tendency to be offended.

I don't fancy a trip to human jail or having to beat yet more men over the head with a baseball bat.

Following the faintest hint of Kian's woodsmoke and whiskey scent, I

pass the dilapidated barn that was probably red at one point but now looks more like a muddy brown. I get a whiff of moldy hay and manure that briefly masks Kian's scent, then circle around the back of the building where it butts up against a small forested area of evergreens.

I pass into the trees, surprised by how perfectly symmetrical the rows are. A man-made forest, it looks like—maybe meant for a Christmas tree farm? I weave my way through the trees, most of which are much taller than me and have wide, fluffy bodies that obscure my path enough to keep me from being able to see Kian. I follow his scent, which is stronger than the evergreen, and at some point, the sharp, coppery tang of blood joins his unique signature.

Worry crawls under my skin like a parade of ants. I don't know if that scent means he's hurt himself or someone else.

But I get my answer as soon as I find him.

He's standing with his back to me, one hand braced against a scrappy little half-dead evergreen, his head hanging. The knuckles of his other hand are bloody, and I can see remnants of his blood on the tree trunk. There's more smoke to his unique smell now, and I can't help but think it's because of his heightened anger.

Where there's smoke, there's fire.

A twig cracks beneath my bare foot, and Kian shoves away from the tree, whirling on me with both fists clenched.

He looks wild. Almost as wild as Frost looked in the throes of his vicious attack. Fear snakes up my spine, but I straighten my shoulders and stare him down, waiting for him to get ahold of himself. Frost had a reason to be feral, since he's so full of shadow magic that it's nearly bursting out of him. Kian doesn't.

After a moment, his fingers uncurl and his shoulders slump forward.

We eye each other in a loaded silence. There's a tightness around his eyes that tells me whatever emotions he's dealing with are still crowding his mind.

"Malix says Frost seems okay physically," I tell him, careful to keep my voice calm and even, like I'm speaking to a wounded animal. "Just a bump on the head."

It's an attempt to reassure him. To make that worry around his eyes go away. But the truth is, *maybe* Frost will be all right. Physically, anyway. Mentally, though? There's a big difference between being okay physically and being... okay.

If he never comes back from the wild, dark place he was in when he woke

up, how is that okay?

It's not.

It never can be.

Unfortunately, my lame attempt at soothing the beast fails spectacularly.

Kian snarls, a gut-wrenching, horrific sound that's more pain than anger. Before I can move to stop him, he twists around and punches the tree again. Over and over, each time opening his wounds wider, spattering blood on the ridged bark.

I wince with every thud, my stomach clenching. Should I wait it out? Let him get that aggression out of his system?

If I try to intervene, there's no guarantee he won't accidentally punch me in his blind fury. So I hover behind him on the balls of my feet, trying to force a decision that feels impossible in this particular moment.

When I hear a popping sound that's a little too close to bones cracking, my decision is made for me. I leap forward and grab his arm with a sharp, "Hey!"

Yanking with my whole weight, I force him away from the tree.

"Stop it. You're hurting yourself," I grit out, digging my fingers into his skin.

"Don't touch me!" he snarls.

His eyes are wild and unfocused, and he rips his arm from my grasp as if I've burned him. With an inarticulate sound, he whirls around and shoves both hands through his hair. Blood smears over the tanned skin at his temple like war paint, and he stalks away from me, breathing so hard it's a miracle that fire doesn't emanate from his lungs.

"I fucking failed!" he growls, dropping his bloody hands to his sides. He turns back to face me, rage tightening every line of his rugged features. "What the fuck did I do? Quinton threatened my brother, and what the fuck did I do? I stood by and let it happen. I let Frost sacrifice himself."

"You couldn't have known—"

"I should have!"

"—what Quinton was going to do," I finish doggedly, forcing myself to face his rage head on.

He's terrifying like this, almost otherworldly in his wrath. But he isn't directing the violence toward me. If this is what he needs—to rant and rage and scream—well, I can fucking relate to that. And I can be here for him as he does it.

Kian jabs his thumb into his chest. “It’s *my* job to protect them. Mine. This whole shitty situation is my fault. It’s on me.”

“It’s not,” I say firmly.

“Frost *died* today,” Kian roars, advancing on me with a wild glint in his eye. “I should have been the one who died.”

“Frost is *alive* because of *you*,” I point out. Surely he isn’t too far gone for facts and logic.

My heart stops beating as Kian strides toward me suddenly, bearing down on me like a runaway train. His hands grip my shoulders hard, and he pins me against the tree with stiff, unyielding arms as he snarls, “I never should have allowed this to happen!”

My heart flutters as his words echo in the air around us, finally fading away to a devastating silence. Our gazes lock, and my throat tightens as I fall into the depths of his gold-ringed brown eyes, lost in the painful void of our phantom mate bond.

Beneath the fury, I see something else. Something... lost and sad. Something almost like *longing*, the way a man might look at a woman he knows he can’t have.

An answering ache throbs in my own chest, and goosebumps spread across my skin as a cool breeze brushes over my body.

Speaking as softly as I can, I murmur, “You should never have allowed this to happen? Which ‘this’ do you mean, Kian? Quinton hurting Frost? Or the three of you mating with me and then discarding me?”

He doesn’t even hesitate. “All of it.”

A sharp slice of agony cuts me to my core, but I ignore it. This isn’t about me or the fact that he wanted the bond to fail forever when he snuck that potion into the antidote for the shadow poison.

Ignoring the unspoken words that fill the space between us like a soundless scream, I reach up to rest my hands over his on my shoulders. “What happened to Frost isn’t your fault, and you know it. All three of you look out for one another, and I know all three of you would die for each other. If Frost were in your position right now and you were in his, he’d be just as fucked up. He’d wish it were *him*, just like you wish it was you now. He wouldn’t want you to blame yourself for what happened.”

Kian stares at me, his jaw tight. His features are still hard as stone, full of fury and guilt. Full of so many emotions that I can’t even begin to identify them all.

Then, in the space of a single heartbeat, the stone cracks.

A new emotion rushes up to replace all the others, and his eyes spark with intensity as he yanks me against his body, crushing his lips to mine.

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AMORA

MAYBE I SHOULD BE USED to the way Kian kisses by now, but I'm not. I don't think I ever will be, honestly.

His lips move against mine with bruising intensity, his tongue swiping over my lower lip before pressing into my mouth, demanding entry. I open to him, and he angles his head to take it deeper, plunging his tongue into my mouth like he's trying to lay some kind of claim on me.

One large hand splays across my back, the other wandering down to palm at my ass as he presses me harder against the tree he was just punching. The rough bark scrapes against my skin, and I'm probably getting his blood smeared on my shoulder, but I don't care about that.

I don't care about anything.

I can't think about anything except the whiskey and woodsmoke of Kian's scent and the low growls he makes in his throat as he devours me.

Kissing Kian has never been a *gentle* experience, but now it's something else entirely. It's like being swept up in a hurricane, my feet dragged off the ground and my body tossed about by the brutal winds. Like being carried away, unsure where I'm going to land and if I'll still be in one piece when I do.

Heat and something almost like a survival instinct rise up in me at the same time, and I push against Kian's grip as I slide my tongue into his mouth, battling with his as if I'm trying to fight against a force of nature.

I'm making little noises too, grunts and pants and soft mewling noises that are swallowed up by Kian's mouth.

When he drags his lips away from mine, I suck in a breath like I haven't filled my lungs in days.

“Fuck, you taste good,” he mutters, his words barely intelligible as he trails his mouth over my jaw, then down the column of my throat. He drops his head lower, dragging his tongue over the bare skin of my breast before latching his lips around my nipple.

His front teeth bite down hard on the stiff bud as his hand comes up to palm my other breast, rolling that nipple between his fingers. The twin bolts of pleasure and pain make my mouth drop open, a startled cry falling from my lips as a gush of wetness seeps from my pussy.

Kian goes still for a moment, angling his head just a little to look up at my face through his dark lashes. Then he bites down again, even harder this time, at the same moment he pinches my nipple between two of his knuckles, tugging on it almost viciously.

The spark of pain is more pronounced this time, sharp and immediate... and the rush of pleasure afterward is even more intense.

“Fuck... Kian...”

I let out a sobbing moan, and he snarls, pulling back and straightening his spine to stare down at me. His pupils are so wide that they’ve overtaken nearly all of his irises, leaving just a hint of dark brown and the gold rings that burn at the edges.

Fire and darkness.

Just like the man himself.

His nostrils flare as he hooks an arm around my lower back, dragging me closer. At the same time, one of his feet kicks mine wider apart, and he wedges his muscled thigh between my legs as he pins me against his broad body.

My clit drags against his thick thigh, and I shudder involuntarily, my lips slightly parted as I stare up at him. Unable to help myself, I roll my hips against him, getting more friction on my clit and making my lower body throb.

“Look at you,” he rasps in a low voice, breathing hard. His free hand moves up to grip my jaw in a tight hold, tilting my head up toward his. “You’re so fucking hungry for me, so desperate. You’d make yourself come just by humping my leg, wouldn’t you?”

Anger and blazing heat rip through me at his words.

I hate that he can see through me so well.

I fucking hate that he’s right.

“Do it,” he commands, his arm banding against me even tighter, keeping

me pinned in place. “Make yourself come.”

My body goes stiff for a moment. I’m tempted to resist, to deny him just to prove that I still can.

But the thing is, Kian’s not as in control of this moment as he’d like to think. He’s dragged me so close to his body that I can feel his cock throbbing against my lower belly, and as we stay frozen in place for a few long seconds, it pulses against me, droplets of precum smearing over my skin.

He knows how much I want him in this moment, but he can’t fucking deny that he wants me too.

So I hold his gaze almost defiantly and roll my hips again, dragging my clit over his hard thigh as a soft moan falls from my lips. I do it again, shifting my stance a little to get the exact angle that sends pleasure spiraling through my core.

It’s messy and animalistic, no finesse or romance to be found anywhere as I ride his thigh shamelessly, humping his leg just like he said I would. He’s got me pinned so tightly that I don’t have that much range of motion, but I have enough to get what I need.

And I take it.

My breathing gets faster, and I stare up into his burning, unblinking eyes as I push myself closer and closer to the edge. I can feel myself leaving a smear of arousal on his thigh, but I don’t care. All I care about is the desperate need to break the tension building inside me, the need to feel pleasure pour through me like liquid fire.

“No one else can make you feel this way, can they?” Kian growls, his voice tinged with an edge of the same desperation I feel.

I don’t even bother trying to respond—not by speaking or even shaking my head. His grip on me is so tight that I probably couldn’t move my head anyway, and I don’t want to say the truth out loud.

No.

No one has ever made me feel this way, and no one ever could.

Frost and Malix both make me feel so many things, each of those two men affecting me in ways no one else does too. All three of the feral shifters have their own unique way of getting under my skin, of tearing down my walls even when I try not to let them.

And this?

This right here is Kian’s way. Something that could only ever exist between the two of us. A potent, overwhelming mix of anger and pain and

love and hate that makes me want to tear him to pieces just so I can get closer to the heart of who he is. Just so I can dig out his soul and wrap myself in it like a blanket.

Kian's lips press together as he realizes I'm not going to speak, but rather than demanding an answer, he just uses his grip on me to rock me more forcefully against his thigh, grinding his cock against my stomach as he does.

And finally, it hits.

My legs tighten around his, my toes curling into the dirt as white heat bursts through my body like a supernova.

“Oh god! Oh shit! Fuck. Fuck!”

I lose my rhythm, but Kian takes over, guiding me up and down as my soaked pussy slides over his leg. The orgasm rolls through me in waves, making me shudder and shake with each new spasm of pleasure.

My heartbeat seems to speed up and slow down all at once, thudding heavily in my chest as I blink dazedly.

Kian's hold on me finally loosens, and I sink back against the tree as a few inches of space open up between us. He's breathing harder too, even though he's not the one who just came, and he slides his hand over my hip before delving his fingers between my legs.

Before I'm ready for it, two thick digits slide into me, and my pussy clenches tight around the intrusion.

“You're soaked,” he comments in a rough voice. “Your thighs are wet with it. *My* thigh is wet with it. I can feel you fluttering around my fingers, trying to pull me in deeper. That's what you want, isn't it, baby? More? You're still so fucking hungry.”

As if to show me how true his words are, he drags his fingers out of me and brings them to his lips. I can see the way light glints off the slick arousal that coats them, all the way past the second knuckle. He sticks both fingers in his mouth and sucks on them, and my stomach clenches as a fire stokes low in my belly.

“Maybe I *am* hungry,” I murmur, a challenge in my tone.

Reaching down, I wrap my hand around his cock, taking almost vicious pleasure in the way his body jerks at my touch, the chiseled muscles of his stomach flexing. His shaft is already slick, coated with precum from when he was grinding against my stomach, and I squeeze tightly as I glide my hand up and down in a deliberate movement.

Then I release him and bring my fingers to my own mouth, holding his

gaze as I draw my tongue up the length of each one.

Kian freezes as he watches me, his body going as still and tense as a predator's.

Then something in him seems to snap.

With a noise that's barely even human, he lifts me by my legs, slamming my back against the tree again as he holds my thighs open and drives into me, burying himself to the hilt in one hard thrust.

He wasn't lying about how fucking wet I am, but my body still has to stretch to accommodate his thick girth, and the sudden feeling of fullness forces the air from my lungs. My head tips back, hitting the tree trunk with a dull thunk that I would probably feel if all my nerve endings weren't so attuned to the man fucking me.

Without giving me any time to adjust, he draws out and thrusts back inside, grunting like an animal as he fucks me into the rough bark of the tree. He does it again and again, pulling out so far that my body feels empty and bereft before slamming back inside and filling me to the brink again.

My arms wrap around his shoulders, my legs hooking around his waist as pleasure flares inside me again. My clit is still pulsing from the aftershocks of my first orgasm, but my body seems to care as little as Kian does that I just came.

Even though I'm so oversensitive that each brush against my clit is a mixture of pleasure and pain, I'm going to come again. It's not going to take all that long either.

My eyelids droop, and I start to bury my face in Kian's neck as I try to ride out the torrent of sensations. But he lifts one hand away from my leg, keeping me pinned between his massive body and the tree as he grabs a fistful of my hair, wrapping it around his hand.

"Don't you dare fucking hide from me," he grunts, driving into me again and hitting a spot inside me that makes me gasp. "Let me see you. Look at me."

I don't want to look at him. I don't want to let him see all the things inside me that our rough fuck has laid bare, and I don't want to see those things in him either. But as our gazes lock, I find that I can't look away from his dark eyes. I'm falling into their depths, lost in the fierce, possessive need that burns deep within them.

And I don't know if it's the look on his face or the way he drives in so deep that I feel like he might shatter me, but the orgasm that's been building

in me finally explodes.

I yank against his tight grip on my hair as my body convulses in his arms, and Kian's thrusts become harder and more erratic, his pelvis slapping against mine as he fucks me like an animal.

The muscles in his neck stand out, straining under his tanned skin as he lets out a guttural cry. His cock thickens and swells, and I clamp down harder around him, the ripples of my own release milking him of his.

"Fuck. So goddamn tight," he grunts, thrusting into me again as another jet of hot cum fills my pussy. "So. Fucking. Good."

He thrusts two more times, forcing himself deeper inside me even as my core squeezes him like a vise. I cling to his shoulders as he finally goes still, breathing hard as we both come down from the rush of our climaxes.

With his cock still buried inside me, Kian finally releases his grip on my hair. He nuzzles his face into the crook of my neck, his arms tightening around my waist until our sweat-soaked bodies can't possibly get any closer. I press feather-light kisses along his hairline and temple, my fingertips swirling over his upper back, over the clenched muscles in his shoulders. I caress every part of him that I can reach, a reminder that I'm still here as he tries to chase his inner demons away.

I don't want to let him go. Not yet. There's a kind of vulnerability to him right now that calls to some deeply buried part of me. He doesn't let this side of himself out, like, *ever*, which isn't a healthy way to live. The longer he bottles this shit up, the more he's going to explode like he did on that poor evergreen tree.

And I can feel that something is "off" inside him, even now.

The release he had with me wasn't enough to erase the way he feels inside, and for some reason, I *know* that. I know it as surely as I know myself. No matter what I do, he's going to harbor that anger and the gnawing feeling that he could have done better.

I don't have an explanation for why I can sense his emotions so vividly, because as far as I know, we're no longer bonded.

But if that's the case, why can I feel this strong sense of despair from him? Why can I sense his emotions so clearly?

Pushing away those questions for the moment, I hold tight to him for a long while, ignoring the way the bark digs into my shoulders. The warmth of his body against mine is enough to make up for it. He's worth the discomfort at my back, because for the first time in as long as I've known him, he's fully

here with me. All of him, all the good parts and the bad, nothing hidden or held back.

We probably aren't entirely on the same page mentally or emotionally, but for the first time since our night in that hotel room in Montana, it feels like we're close.

The heat between us finally begins to dissipate, and I become aware of the cool breeze again as it dries the sweat on my skin. After another few heartbeats, Kian pulls out of me, leaving me almost painfully empty. My body protests the loss of his thick cock as he gently guides me back to the ground on shaky knees.

He leans back and brushes my hair away from my face, studying me with an expression that, while still haunted, is a little less broken than it was before. His gaze roams intently over my face, as if he's trying to memorize me or read something in my features.

I let him, because I'm looking at him too.

His emotions are squarely visible on his handsome face. The scar over his eye bunches from the tightness in his brow, and I recognize a pain in his gaze that mirrors my own. It reminds me that we've both lost people and lost parts of ourselves in the burdens we've carried. The quests that led us to each other.

He's never let me in like this. He's never let his walls down long enough for me to see the humanity in him. Maybe, as one of Quinton's special pets, he never felt comfortable enough to do so. Quinton made them all feel subhuman. More monster than man.

But that's not true.

I'll convince them their old alpha was wrong, no matter what it takes.

Kian's roughened fingertips graze over my cheek. His hand trails down my face, my neck, over my collarbone. When his fingers come to rest over my heart, our gazes meet again.

Mine.

It's a small echo of a feeling. The same feeling we had that night we met in Montana, when I gave myself to him in a cheap hotel room and thought he would be my future. A possessiveness like the mating bond that he so callously denied back then.

The ache in my chest is so familiar. The connection is still there like a phantom limb, lost but not really forgotten.

How is it possible for me to feel this way? For it to feel so much like a

mate bond?

I don't want to admit out loud that I still feel some kind of connection between us, especially when I don't understand what it is or how it's possible. So I place my hands on his chest and avoid his gaze, picking my words carefully as I ask, "The potion you all slipped me when we reached the Tree of Life—what was it meant to do?"

Kian's palms slide up my arms, although his gaze remains firmly on my face. "It was meant to break the mate bond. No more, no less."

"Oh."

His hands drift to my neck, and his thumbs press gently into my jaw bone, angling my face up, forcing me to meet his eyes. His gaze grows more intense, heavy with unspoken meaning. He leans in close, his lips brushing against mine as he speaks again.

"But maybe," he murmurs. "Maybe there are some things you just can't fight. Some things that won't break."

I shiver in his arms, an electric feeling trickling down my spine. The truth in his words seems to resonate in my very bones.

Is he right? Are some things unbreakable?

There's no way I should still feel so connected to him or Malix or Frost. And yet, *I do*.

I don't know how to feel about the possibility that we're still mated somehow. If the three of them are fated to bring the shadow realm to Earth, and as a result, ultimately destroy it... And I'm destined to die if I continue along this path of being bonded to them...

Fuck. How are any of us supposed to come out of this alive?

It's on the tip of my tongue to say all of that out loud, but I don't. Why speak such a thing into existence if I don't have to?

I don't want to shatter this moment of tenuous peace that's been forged between us, but it's too late. Reality comes rushing back in like it always does, pricking me with the reminders of where we are and everything that led us here.

Kian releases me, and cold air rushes in as he steps away.

"We should head back," he says gruffly. "I'd like to be near when Frost wakes up. Just in case."

I watch as his walls move back into place brick by brick. One by one, he builds them up, shutting me out, and even though I don't mean to, I can feel myself doing the same.

It's habit by now, for each of us. Something so deeply woven into the fabric of who we are that if we pulled out those threads, I'm not sure there would be anything left.

"Yeah." I nod, pressing away from the tree and ignoring the warm feeling of Kian's cum sliding down my inner thigh. "Let's go back."

Side by side, but with enough distance between us that our arms don't brush, we make our way through the trees toward the farmhouse.

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AMORA

BACK AT THE HOUSE, I slip into the bathroom to clean up a little bit, splashing water on my face and wiping up the mess between my legs with a wad of toilet paper.

When Kian and I step into the kitchen, Malix is elbow deep in the pantry. Sunlight pours through the three picture windows at the back of the house, illuminating every dark corner of the room. A skillet already sits on the stove with something sizzling inside, and a coffee pot percolates on the counter.

Malix glances over at us, and his nostrils flare. Despite my half-assed attempt at cleaning up, I know he can smell the sex on us, but he doesn't mention it. He doesn't really seem jealous or bothered at all, but normally, I'm sure he wouldn't miss a chance to bust Kian's balls. I can't help but think that his muted reaction has a lot to do with his worry for Frost.

None of us are at our best right now.

Malix sets an unopened can of salsa on the counter, then closes the pantry door.

"Whoever these people were, they left a lot of shit behind. There are clothes for you over there." He points at the old, scratched wooden table where a pile waits for us. He's already wearing a pair of loose gray sweatpants and a ratty old white t-shirt. "I wish I could tell you it's fresh eggs for breakfast, but it's not. It's black beans with salsa and stale Pop-Tarts."

I snort and reach for the clothes to sort them out. "What a feast."

Kian grunts his agreement and bypasses the clothes to head for the coffee maker. "At least there's coffee."

"Yeah. It expired five months ago, but..." Malix shrugs, dumping half the jar of salsa into the skillet.

Kian makes a face and reaches for one of the clean mugs Malix has left waiting on the counter. “But beggars can’t be choosers or some shit.”

Slipping my arms into a soft t-shirt, I drag it over my head and free my dark hair from the collar before I ask, “How’s Frost?”

“Still out cold,” Malix tells me, dipping a spatula in the skillet. “He’s doing all right though. His color is good and his breathing is normal. It’s just a waiting game right now.”

The t-shirt and cotton shorts Malix found for me clearly belonged to a teenager. The shorts fit fine, but the t-shirt only comes to my midriff, revealing a strip of skin above the drawstring waist. Not to mention my butt now proudly declares CHEER. One of those human practices I’ve never understood and couldn’t give two shits about.

Kian and I switch places—him carrying his black coffee to the table to dress while I help myself to the coffee.

“Did you get Frost dressed?” I ask Malix, dumping a spoon of sugar into the steaming liquid in my mug.

“No.” He jerks his chin toward the table. “There are clothes for him over there too.”

Clutching the mug in both hands, I lean my hip against the counter and raise an eyebrow at him. “Did you cover him up, at least? It’s like sixty degrees down there.”

Malix returns my arched eyebrow as he switches off the burner on the stove. “Of course I did. What do you take me for, kitty? I’m not going to torture a man when he’s down. Especially not my own damn brother.”

I hold up my hands, careful not to spill a drop of coffee as I keep a firm grip on the handle. It may be expired, but it’s still precious, as far as I’m concerned. “Okay, okay. Just checking.”

He points at me with his wooden spoon and tosses a look over his shoulder at Kian. “Listen to this woman. Acting like we haven’t taken care of each other for decades without her to boss us around.”

Rolling my eyes, I press away from the counter and carry my mug to the table. “Fine. Point taken.”

I opt for a Pop-Tart for breakfast, because salsa just doesn’t sound good for my stomach at the moment. They’re strawberry flavored, which I know means there’s not a single damn strawberry in them, but they’re tasty nonetheless. It occurs to me briefly that maybe I should be concerned that old, expired Pop-Tarts don’t taste any different than fresh ones, but at the

moment, I'm too fucking hungry to care.

My stomach growls at the exact moment I bite into the first pastry, reminding me how long it's been since I've eaten. While Kian and Malix fill up heaping bowls of beans and dollar brand salsa, I polish off the entire Pop-Tart and start on the second one from the foil packet before they join me at the table.

Silence falls over the kitchen for a while, broken only by the clink of silverware and the intermittent thud of a coffee mug being picked up and then set down.

Usually, silences between me and any of these men are loaded. First because I was planning to kill them all, then because they were planning to destroy our bond. Always the subterfuge and ulterior motives between us.

But for the first time, it feels almost companionable, despite the fact that things are still pretty dire.

I break the silence by clearing my throat, then I ask, "When Frost wakes up, should we be prepared for him to not be... well, not be himself? I mean, the way he acted after he was resuscitated..."

Kian and Malix look up at the same time, the sad expression on their faces nearly identical. But then Kian looks away, turning his attention back down to his mostly empty plate and leaving Malix to respond.

"It's a possibility," Malix agrees carefully, digging his fork into his bowl rather than looking at me. He's got a small cut on his cheekbone, and I can tell there's a bruise forming beneath it, a remnant from our fight with Quinton and his minions.

"How big of a possibility?" I press. Part of me doesn't want to know, but I feel like I need to brace myself for whatever might be coming. The more I can understand what Frost is going through right now, the better equipped I'll be to try to help him.

"He's probably overwhelmed by shadows," Malix tells me. "On a normal day, they're a constant presence we're all aware of. Now, though? He's got more of them inside him than normal." He sits back in his chair and tosses his fork down in the bowl, then rubs both his hands over his angular face. "He's probably more shadow than shifter now, after what Quinton did to him."

"That doesn't seem like a good thing."

"It's not," Malix says dully. "The shadows? They're like parasites. Powerful, untamed. An immutable part of us, but also something entirely separate. He may not be able to fight off their influence."

“But you were all capable of fighting off the shadows that Felicity sent after us,” I point out. “You can fight off shadows when they attack you. When they’re outside you. So maybe it *is* possible for him to fight off the ones inside.”

Kian laughs bitterly. “Yeah, not going to happen. The ones that are in us? They’re a *part* of us. That’s like expecting you to fight off being stubborn.”

I glare at him, but don’t get a chance to come up with a witty retort. Malix picks up his fork again as he says, “Kian’s right. It’s like the shadows are knitted into our souls. It’s not like you can just separate the two things cleanly. And at the same time, they sort of have a will of their own. They don’t obey us just because they exist inside us.”

“Well, they must feel *some* sense of loyalty to you,” I point out. “Both times I’ve tried to kill one of you—”

Malix barks a laugh, shaking his head ruefully. “Fucking hell. We really have had a fucked up relationship, haven’t we?”

“That doesn’t matter now,” I say, waving a hand in the air between us. He’s not wrong, but that whole can of worms isn’t the focus of our conversation right now. “What I’m getting at is, both of those times, your shadows woke you up before I could do anything to hurt you. Surely that means something, right?”

Kian shrugs, his expression hard. “It means they have a sense of self-preservation. Like a virus in a host.”

“They don’t do *anything* out of a sense of loyalty,” Malix adds, a muscle in his cheek jumping as he clenches his jaw. “They just hurt us. Constantly. In so many ways.”

He doesn’t elaborate on that, but I don’t need him to. He’s probably thinking about the sister he lost, or his mother, who’s dead now just like Kian’s and Frost’s.

These men have had so much good taken from them and so much pain forced upon them by their old alpha. He created them to fulfill a purpose none of them asked for; one they probably never would have actually wanted to begin with. And because they were born part shadow, part wolf, they’ve lived their lives in extended torment.

The thought of Frost down in the basement, so full of shadows? Fuck, I hate it. I know it’s probably torture for him. Or at least it will be when he wakes again.

I pick off a corner of my fourth Pop-Tart as I ask, “Do you think it was

the pain that made him act like... like that? Or the shadows? He was so vicious. Like a wild animal.”

“Like a monster,” Malix says grimly.

“None of you are *monsters*,” I shoot back, my voice taking on a heated edge. “You’ve been dealt a shitty as fuck hand by a man who wanted to use you, and now we have to figure out where we go from here.”

Malix looks like he doesn’t believe me, but instead of arguing, he just scrubs a hand over his sculpted jaw. “The pain is probably the big reason Frost freaked out, yeah,” he confirms after a moment. “It’s more than just pain though. That much shadow inside him? It’s probably *chaos*. Like I said, the shadows have no loyalty, and they operate by their own rules. Right now, his shadow side outweighs every other part of him. So that’s the side that dominates.”

My stomach clenches, and I set the Pop-Tart down. “Could we find some way to pull the excess shadows from him?”

Kian shakes his head, his gaze flicking up to me for a second before returning to his food. “If there was a way, we’d have found it by now.”

Of course. It only makes sense that they’ve tried to find a way to expel the shadows from themselves—without tearing themselves into pieces. After years of searching for a way to breach the divide between the shadow realm and earth, something that would finally bring them peace, I’m not surprised they attempted to find other means of easing their torment.

We fall silent for another couple of minutes as I process everything that’s just been said and search for a loophole that I know doesn’t exist.

I finish off my last Pop-Tart while Kian refills his coffee, and Malix stares at the last few bites of his beans and salsa like he wants to toss it all in the trash. Somewhere outside, birds chirp in the trees, and the muffled sounds filter in through the windows. The peaceful, happy sound is a strange contrast to the situation we’ve found ourselves in.

It makes me wish this were real life—not the beans and stale Pop-Tarts, but the cute farmhouse, the sunshine, a home and family and no shadows trying to destroy us from all angles.

When Kian returns from the coffee pot, he sits heavily on the chair and mutters, “What Quinton did to Frost... he said it was an experiment. And as far as he’s concerned, it worked. He could do that to the whole pack.”

Malix’s violet gaze flashes in the sunlight. He shoves his half-finished bowl away and straightens, resting one elbow on the edge of the table. “Yeah.

I've thought of that too."

Picking up my mug and cradling it against my chest, I slouch back in my seat. The heat from the coffee warms me even as my skin prickles with a sudden chill. "What do you mean?"

Malix huffs out a breath. "Quinton never had the ability to 'force' shadows into someone before. He created us, using magic to make it so that we were *born* with shadows already inside of us. Already a part of us, even before birth. But it seems like he's leveled up. He figured out some way to force shadows into a fully grown shifter. He could turn anyone in the pack now."

Kian growls, his hands curling into fists. "He could create a whole fucking army."

But I shake my head, picking out a flaw in their theory. "No way. He can't create an army that way. It would never work. What Quinton did almost killed Frost. I mean, *it did* kill Frost. His heart stopped beating. He's only alive right now because you fucking resuscitated him. There's no way a weaker shifter could survive that."

"Maybe," Malix agrees. "Or maybe not. We really don't know anything at this point. Except that Quinton would definitely be willing to risk killing some of his pack members if it meant he could have an entire army of feral shifters at his fingertips. And that makes him more dangerous than ever."

In the beat of silence after that grim declaration, something clatters beneath us in the basement.

We all freeze, and my skin prickles with unease.

A howl rises up, the sound unearthly and terrifying. Then more clattering and several heavy thuds, accompanied by angry grunts.

My stomach clenches, all four of the Pop-Tarts I just ate threatening to make a reappearance.

Frost is awake. And he's clearly not in a good mood.

F R O S T

THE SHADOWS HAVE TEETH.

They have teeth, and they rip and tear.

I throw my weight against the rusted chains holding me in place. I don't know this room. How did I become chained? The heavy pipe above groans under the force of my weight, but it doesn't give.

I'm in slivers. In tatters. Nothing but pieces.

There's blood on my skin, dripping down my arms and torso.

No, it's not blood.

It's shadows.

Shadows with teeth.

I need to get out. Out of this dank, dark room. Out of my mind.

The shadows twist and roil inside me. Everywhere they touch, they flash black against my skin and agony lances through me. I'm unsettled. I'm dying.

The pain is...

The pain just is.

I try to yank my hands downward. Metal cuts into my wrists. I howl when something in my chest burns like a knife blade. Pain throbs behind my eyes. My head is going to split open any moment, I'm sure of it. It's too full. Too full of too many things.

Shadows.

Pain.

Fury.

Violence.

A lock tumbles, the soft sound reaching my ears like a crack of thunder, louder than it should be in my mind. A door opens.

I cringe away from the light that falls through the open door, snarling as it burns my already aching eyes. The giant structure next to me is cold on my bare skin, but it gives me just enough room to hide.

“Frost?”

A light voice. Musical. What is it saying?

The shadows scream in my head.

Another voice speaks. “I don’t think he’s in his right mind.”

“Yeah. I think you’re right,” the first voice agrees.

I don’t... I don’t understand the words. It’s just noise. Sounds that make no sense. The quiet voices make even less sense than the shadows. The shadows dart across my skin in agitation, twisting around my bones and thrashing in my soul.

Kill them.

Fury overrides every other emotion inside me. I lunge from behind the metal cylinder and leap for the three figures standing over me. I almost reach them, but the heavy metal chains wrapped around my wrists stops my momentum, and I’m thrown off my feet. I’m yanked back and land hard on a stone floor, but everything else hurts so much that I don’t even feel the impact.

I am pain.

I am shadows.

I’m nothing else.

The smallest of the three figures stares at me, her big green eyes shining. Why do I know those eyes? Why do I want to drown in them?

“He’s not even human,” she says, her voice choked.

“He’s only shadow,” the largest figure agrees.

What are they saying?

Destroy. Destroy. Destroy.

I haul my body backward to reduce the strain on my arms. My feet slip out from beneath me and get tangled up in something soft and warm on the floor. I kick at it, snarling. Is it attacking me?

Destroy.

“We have to break him out of this,” someone says. I don’t know which one.

I can’t even focus on their faces. But I know them. I think I know them.

Enemies.

Lovers.

Friends.

Who is it?

Who am I?

“Can we even do that? Can we get him back from this?”

There’s a short, deep laugh. “We’ve been stuck with the shadows our whole lives. I don’t see a way out of this for him.”

“There has to be...” A pause.

I snarl and lunge, trying to reach them. I want meat in my teeth. I want flesh. I want blood.

This time, they don’t react. The small one continues talking. “You know, he told me once that when he’s around me, I help the pain go away. Maybe if I could just get close to him... Maybe the bond will—”

She stops talking abruptly.

The bond will...

The bond.

Those words are strangely familiar. What do they mean?

It doesn’t matter. Destroy.

Pulling hard against the chains, I rattle the pipes overhead and roar my fury.

The tall figure with dark hair and a hard expression shakes his head. “No way. There’s not a chance in fucking hell I’m letting you near him when he’s like this.”

“But if there’s a chance—”

“No.”

Yes, come closer. Let me eat you.

I can imagine the meat ripping between my teeth. Like a deer in the forest, blood cooling on my tongue after the life leaves its eyes...

“You can’t stop me.”

“You’re out of your fucking mind if you think I won’t chain you to the washing machine.”

“Kian,” the other man warns, running a hand over his short, tightly curled dark hair.

Kian.

That name.

I know that name.

But the knowledge of what it means is just out of reach. Frustrated, I growl and throw myself against the chains again. The pipes move, jarred

loose from their brackets, but they don't give.

There's a scuffle, and I whip my head up to see the lithe dark-haired woman shove the taller man away.

"Fuck off," she snaps. "This isn't a fucking dictatorship, hard as that might be for you to believe. You can't tell me what to do."

The woman comes toward me, moving slowly. The other two men attempt to grab her again, but she slaps their hands away and gives them a glare that sends a burst of adrenaline surging through me.

Violence.

Anger.

I want it all.

Give it to me.

I pull against my bonds, my arms stretched behind my body as the chains hold them tight, my chest and head straining forward as my feet brace against the floor. I want to reach her. I can imagine her skin tearing between my teeth. The shadows scream for her blood.

"Frost, it's me," she says softly, stopping only inches away. "It's Amora."

I can't understand her. Do I even know this language? All I know is shadows. Darkness. Agony.

She tentatively holds out her hand, keeping it just out of my reach.

I eye her fingers, confused by a sudden stirring of emotions beneath the shadows. Affection? What is that?

A memory flashes over me.

Those fingertips.

My skin.

Pleasure.

I stop straining against the chains and lift my gaze to meet hers.

Kill.

Maim.

Destroy.

No...

She isn't the enemy.

My breaths slow and turn shallow as she reaches farther, closing the small distance she left between us at first.

Then she's touching my face.

Relief washes over me like a cold rain, chasing away the darkness. Warmth spreads beneath the very tips of her fingers, and I lean into it, my

gaze locked on hers.

I know you.

The overwhelming fog, the screams of the shadows in my head... all of it eases just enough for me to remember one very important word. "Amora."

A smile breaks over her face, and she slides her palm against my cheek. "Yes. It's me. There you are."

The more of her skin that touches mine, the more clear-headed I feel.

Mine.

This is mine.

"Come back to us," Amora begs softly. "Please, Frost. Stay with me. Don't give in to the shadows."

The shadows.

Pain tears through me as if the shadows filling my body are trying to rip me apart from the inside.

No mercy.

No kindness.

No peace.

Kill.

Kill.

Kill.

I lose focus on her beautiful face. I lose her name. I lose that momentary connection that reminded me I'm more than a monster made of shadows.

Falling back beneath the weight of the darkness boiling over inside me, I scream.

Then I attack.

AMORA

MY HEART LURCHES, and I leap away, but not before Frost's teeth manage to bite at my finger.

Searing pain zings up my hand. I stick the broken skin in my mouth as I take several more steps backward, tears burning my eyes as I suck away the coppery blood. Malix and Kian jump between me and Frost, grabbing him by his arms as they haul him back into the corner behind the water heater.

With my throbbing finger in my mouth, I watch as they check his bonds. He snarls and lashes out at them, but his energy seems to be waning, which is good. If he had more strength, he'd probably be trying to shift, and I'm not sure if the chains could hold him in his terrifyingly huge shadow form.

Releasing Frost, Kian reaches up and leans on the metal pipes, testing their hold.

"Think we should knock him out?" Malix says in a low voice. His fingers dig into Frost's neck as he holds him in place and ignores the vicious growls coming from his brother. "He's still weak. Which means when he gets his shit together, he'll rip those pipes right out of the wall."

Kian grunts. "No. We aren't going to knock him out. He's been through too much already, and I worry about doing permanent damage. But we need to figure out something else. Soon."

Once they're suitably sure that Frost isn't going to Hulk his way out of the metal pipes in the immediate future, they leave him crumpled in the corner growling like an abused dog, and we lock up the room before climbing back upstairs.

My shoulders feel heavy, and my heart even heavier. I veer off from the basement door, crossing the threshold into the living room where I sink

wearily onto the overstuffed couch.

The pillows cradle me like arms. I rest my head on the back of the cushion and close my eyes, drifting behind darkness while my finger continues to ache.

A few moments later, the couch shifts as Malix sits beside me. I know it's him from his fresh, sunshine scent. His warm fingers wrap around my hand, and he drags my injured finger into his lap.

Opening one eye, I glance down to see that he's got a dusty bottle of peroxide and a crumpled tube of antibiotic ointment resting on his knee.

"We've got enough to deal with without adding an infection on top of it all," he explains, draping a folded dish towel on his thigh. He upends the peroxide over my finger, and I wince at the sting.

I vaguely recall saying something similar to Kian the day he gave Erik the witch a hunk of skin from his body. The fact that Malix is caring for me the way I did for Kian sends a wave of affection through me before I can harden my heart against it.

Kian is sitting in the rocking chair to our left, his legs spread and his feet planted on the floor. It's such a strangely domestic thing to watch him rock back and forth in the wooden chair. Not something I ever expected to see from the big, broody man.

"You need to stay away from Frost," he tells me grimly. "Next time, it could be your neck instead of your finger."

I shake my head, my lips pulling back in a grimace as Malix dumps more peroxide on the wound. "No. I got through to him."

"We'll find another w—"

"No," I cut him off. "I got *through* to him. I can do it again. I can bring him back."

"Over my dead body."

"I can arrange that," I snarl, surging to my feet with clenched fists.

Kian launches to his feet in return, his expression twisted into something hard. Cold.

Malix sighs and sets the peroxide on the scratched coffee table. "Fucking hell. Can we not do this?"

Even though the plaintive note in his usually lighthearted voice sends a pang through me, I ignore him and stalk past the coffee table to go toe to toe with Kian.

"I'm not going to let you bully me," I say. "You can pull this 'I'm in

charge' bullshit all you want, but it's not going to change anything. You may be the de facto leader of your brothers, but you're not in charge of me. I'm my own goddamn leader."

Kian's expression darkens, the angles of his face seeming to grow even harder somehow. "You threw yourself into my world. By doing so, you put yourself under my protection, whether you like it or not. And I'm telling you, you will *not* be attempting to get through to Frost again like that. End of story."

All the earlier softness I felt between us is long gone now. I glare up at him, my fingers shaking from how badly they want to curl into fists. "I dare you to try to stop me."

His hands lash out, wrapping around my biceps in a tight grip. "Don't ask for something you don't want."

Despite my fury, his touch sends a frisson of awareness skittering through me. I shove away my attraction to him, the way my body responds to his touch and the way my wolf perks up inside me.

"What makes you think I don't want to fucking fight you?" I bite out.

Instead of answering, Kian tightens his fingers painfully, lifts me off the floor, and throws me on the couch.

I slam into the cushions, all the air expelling from me with an audible *oof*. He doesn't release me, still leaning over me, lording his weight and size over mine.

The helpless pain that's been eating away at my heart since Frost bit me downstairs explodes out of me, making me react before I can think. Wrenching one arm out of his grasp, I deck him in the side of his head.

Kian lets out a pained grunt as his other hand loosens, but he recovers quickly. His right hand slides up to my jaw and shoves me deeper into the couch cushions, his hand wrapped around my throat—not tight enough to cut off my air supply, but enough that I'm sure he can feel the throb of my pulse against his palm.

Blinking away the blow to his temple, he growls, "Stop fighting, and I'll let you up."

Wrong thing to say, motherfucker.

I buck against the cushions and manage to free one leg enough to knee him in the groin.

"Son of a bitch!" Kian snarls, then throws his entire body on top of mine. Before I can get another blow in, Malix appears. He somehow wedges

himself between us, pulling Kian's hand away from my throat as he covers my body with his. His muscular weight squeezes me into the couch and forms a barrier between me and Kian, who's kneeling over us both now.

"Time out," Malix commands, an unusual note of authority in his tone. "I'm serious. Cut it the fuck out. We all need some damn rest, okay? It's been a shitty couple of days. Let's get some sleep, then we'll figure out a plan later."

Some kind of silent communication seems to pass between Malix and Kian. For a moment, I think Kian's going to throw him off me and keep fighting. But then the tall, dark-haired shifter deflates. He sighs deeply, his shoulders sagging, and his hard expression falls away, replaced by one of exhaustion.

"Yeah. Yeah. You're right." Straightening, he climbs off the couch. He winces a little as he steps away, adjusting his groin and shooting me an irritated look.

I don't say anything. All the fight has gone out of me too. I don't want to argue with Kian. I don't want any of this.

I just want Frost back.

Kian stalks out of the living room to the foyer, then his stomping footsteps disappear up the stairs to the second floor.

Malix crawls off me and offers me a hand up, blowing out a breath as he does. "Damn, kitty. Why you gotta poke the bear?"

"I don't know. It's a character flaw," I reply, unfolding from the couch and giving my neck a roll.

"Not sure about that," Malix says, flashing me the playful smile I've been missing since we arrived here. "It might be a character strength. Whatever it is though, it's hella entertaining. Usually."

"Glad to be of service."

He touches my chin with his thumb, his gaze sweeping over my face. "Go get some sleep, kitty. You'll feel better." Then he presses a light kiss on my forehead before he turns and walks away, toward the kitchen.

"Where are you going?" I call after him. The warmth from his lips on my skin makes me want to ask him to come upstairs with me. I want the peace and comfort of his arms around me.

"I'm going to take some food and water to Frost," he calls back without turning around. "Don't worry about me. I'll be fine."

I nod even though he's not looking at me, then trudge upstairs. Alone.

The hallway is dim, since there's only one window at the end of the corridor to let in the morning sunlight. Weeks' or maybe months' worth of dust swirl around in the beam of light as I bypass the one closed door, where I imagine Kian is sulking. I choose the bedroom at the far end of the hall, putting as much distance as I can between the two of us.

A guest room, it looks like. I close the door and venture into the gloom. Ambient light filters in around the edges of the heavy drapes. The queen bed is covered in a floral duvet and about fifty-two throw pillows. In the corner, an ironing board and an old sewing machine crouch next to one another, both covered in a layer of ghostly dust. Against one wall, a large chest of drawers still holds a few belongings—a mother of pearl handled brush, a crystal perfume decanter, a pair of delicate golden bifocals. Even stranger is the scarf draped over the mirror, concealing it entirely.

The place feels like a room outside of time.

I collapse onto the duvet, resting my upper body on the bed and letting my legs dangle off the side of the mattress. Staring up at the ceiling, I take a few deep breaths and let the adrenaline of the past few hours fade away. Between my argument with Kian and nearly being attacked by Frost, my nerves feel like live wires sparking under my skin.

Frost *recognized* me.

He said my name.

For the briefest moment, I had him back, right there in my grasp. The change, though? When the momentary softness disappeared into savagery almost instantaneously? Reliving it in my mind hurts almost as much as seeing it in real time. My stomach churns at the memory of his blue gaze latching on to mine, his pupils dilating, his eyes shining as he recognized me.

And the way they shuttered right before he lunged.

A single hot tear leaks out of the corner of my eye and trails like fire down my cheek toward the blanket.

Frost doesn't deserve this, and I feel so, so helpless against the nightmare raging inside him.

My eyes are still closed, and I'm dozing somewhere between sleep and wakefulness, when I sense Malix outside the door. It's the strangest feeling—like a little tickle in my chest, as if the essence of what makes him *him* has reached out to touch me.

Instead of just barging in, he knocks. Lightly. Almost... politely.

I roll off the mattress and pad to the door to let him in. I don't even say

anything. I just open it, then walk back to the bed and resume my position.

Malix shuts the door behind him and then crosses to stand over me. His knees nudge mine apart so he can get in close and peer down at my face. “What’s up, kitty? I could smell your tears in the damn basement.”

I chuckle bitterly and swipe at the new droplets that are rising in my eyes, then look away from him, pinning my gaze on the scarf-covered mirror. “I don’t get any kind of privacy with you assholes around.”

He grins, then slips a knee onto the bed next to me. Shifting his weight, he flops down beside me, propping his head up on one arm. As his body settles into the mattress, I roll toward him unconsciously. He slides his palm up my arm, his fingers soft over the place where Kian gripped me so fiercely not that long ago. “Nope. No privacy when you’re a part of our pack.”

His words hit me like a wrecking ball to the chest. My heart constricts at the idea of being part of them. I won’t admit it out loud and can barely even admit it to myself in the privacy of my own thoughts, but... I want that. Even though I know it’s probably stupid, that it’s a dangerous pipe dream, I want it.

Maybe one day we could make a home of our own, a pack of our own. Maybe I could take them to Montana, introduce them to my friends, build a life together...

If we survive Quinton’s nefarious plans.

If we can recover from all the shit that’s happened between us.

Malix is still looking at me, and I’m afraid he can read too much in my expression. I don’t want to tell him what I was just thinking, but I don’t want him to leave either. His presence is solid and comforting, and I feel like I would float away without it.

“I’m fucked up,” I admit. “It’s just... Frost. The way he attacked me. It...”

Malix’s violet gaze flicks to my hand where it rests on my stomach. My finger is no longer bleeding, but it still throbs from the memory of Frost’s teeth breaking my skin.

He moves his palm over my arm and gently cups my injured hand. “I know.”

“Out of the three of you, my connection to Frost was...”

I trail off, trying to figure out the right word. Because it isn’t that my connection to any of them is stronger than to the others. Just different, as if their personalities and the way they intersect with mine form a special bond

that's unique to each man. Equal to each other but for different reasons.

Still unsure of the exact right word, I settle for, "It was *simple*. My connection to Frost has always been easiest. Now, that's gone. He wants to kill me." My voice cracks. "He doesn't even know me."

Malix hums low in his throat and gathers me into his arms. I sink against his chest and inhale deeply, letting his fresh scent drown me and chase away the churning emotions inside me. I'm cold inside, but Malix is sunshine and warmth, and he chases away the coldest places in my soul.

"Frost was always the best of us all," he says, the rumble of his voice vibrating my hands on his chest. He holds me tightly, but not so tightly that I couldn't pull away if I wanted to.

It's a small thing, but it shows me how much he understands me. I need the room to back away if necessary. I need the space to breathe and be my own person.

For now, though... I don't want him to let me go.

"But," Malix adds softly, strain coloring his voice, "we do have to consider that the darkness inside him might be too much to overcome. We're not good people, Amora. We're made of darkness. We're made of shadows from another plane that thrive on violence and chaos. Pain and destruction. We aren't made to love."

I draw back enough to look up into his shining violet eyes, my gaze bouncing back and forth between them.

There are so many things contained in their depths, so many different emotions, and that fact alone convinces me that he and his brothers are more than the monsters they see themselves as.

They're complex. They contain conflicting parts that should be at odds with each other, but which somehow manage to exist side by side.

They're flawed.

But sometimes they're *wonderful* too.

I shake my head stubbornly, pressing my lips together.

"No. You're wrong, Malix. I don't believe that."

AMORA

MALIX BLINKS AT ME, an expression I can't quite read passing through his features as he absorbs my words. His violet eyes look even more starkly beautiful than usual, standing out against the dark tint of his skin as he holds my gaze.

"Thank you, kitty," he murmurs.

Then he leans forward and kisses me.

His hand palms my cheek, a soft and almost sweet gesture that's at odds with the hungry way his lips slant over mine. He rolls toward me, going up on one elbow and leaning over me as we kiss, one hand skating down the curves of my body as he gropes me shamelessly through my borrowed clothes.

When he catches the hem of my shirt between his fingers and tugs it upward, I lift my upper body a little, raising my hands over my head and breaking our kiss to allow him to pull the shirt off. He tosses it somewhere on the floor behind him, neither of us paying attention to where it lands as his gaze rakes over my topless form.

"You've got the prettiest fucking tits," he tells me, dragging his full bottom lip between his teeth as he palms one of them, grazing his thumb over the nipple until it goes stiff and hard under his touch.

"Gee, thanks." My tone is dry, but the words end in a soft hiss as he pinches my nipple lightly, as if he's testing out my response.

"You like that?" He shifts his gaze up to my face, still fondling my breast and playing with my nipple.

"Yeah," I admit, because I really fucking do. And I'm too worn out and worn down by all the shit that's been happening lately to worry about

whether or not it's a good idea to admit that to Malix. Whether or not it's a good idea to lie topless on a bed with him and let him look at me the way he is.

Like he wants to eat me up.

Like he wants to fucking worship me.

"I like it too." He pinches my nipple gently again, rolling it between his fingers, then drops his head and swipes his tongue over the sensitive tip, making me hiss again. "I like seeing what I can do to you, how I can make you respond. Every time I see a new look on your face, I think *that's* my favorite one. But then I do something else and find a new favorite."

Still watching me, he catches my nipple between his teeth, barely putting any pressure on it, just holding it there. I bite down on my lip, unable to tear my gaze away from the sight of him. My clit is throbbing, and I squeeze my legs together a little to ease the ache.

Malix doesn't miss the movement, and he grins mischievously, his teeth still gripping my nipple. Then he closes his lips around my breast, drawing more of it into his mouth with a deep pull that's pleasurable and a little painful all at once. As he sucks on my breast, his hand drifts down between my legs, cupping the damp heat of my pussy through my cotton shorts.

"God, Malix," I groan, arching against him.

I can feel his smile against my skin as he releases my breast from his mouth, and he nips at me lightly again.

"God... Malix..." He shrugs one shoulder. "You can call me either one of those names, kitty. Whichever you like."

I roll my eyes, shifting my gaze up to the ceiling as he tortures my nipple with his tongue again, grinding the heel of his hand against my clit. "I get it. Because you're so godlike?"

"Yeah. Something like that."

He chuckles, and I swear that sound alone could make me come if he does it again. He lifts his head again, peering up at me from beneath his thick dark lashes.

"Besides," he adds, his eyes burning as they meet mine, "you're the one who told me you don't think I'm all bad. Maybe I want to try being good for once."

"Oh, yeah?" I arch a brow. "Good *how*?"

"I'll show you."

With those words, he sits back, leaving my nipple peaked and hard as a

fucking diamond as the cool air of the room hits the tight little bud. He takes a second to shamelessly ogle my boobs before sliding off the mattress and dropping to his knees at the edge of the bed. My legs are still dangling off the side, and he hooks his hands under my knees, tugging me a little closer to the edge until I'm right where he wants me.

The shorts I borrowed are made of a stretchy fabric, so it takes him almost no effort at all to slide them over my hips and down my legs. I don't have any panties on. The shorts were my last article of clothing, his last barrier to having me completely naked.

He seems pleased that it was so easy to get me undressed. He makes a little noise in his throat as he skims his hands up my legs, starting at the ankles and sliding his palms all the way up to my thighs.

"You've got a pretty pussy too," he murmurs. "So pink and wet. So fucking gorgeous."

As he speaks, he spreads my legs open wider, gripping my thighs in both hands as his fingers dig into my flesh. The weight of his gaze makes my core clench, and I can feel the wetness coating my pussy lips as his pupils dilate.

With a look of utter focus, of pure heated fascination, he glides one hand farther up my leg until he reaches the apex of my thighs. I expect him to thrust his finger inside me, but instead, he just slides them through my folds, continuing his possessive perusal of my body.

I can't look away from him. I can't stop staring at the way his muscular shoulders fit between my legs, the way he bites down on his lower lip as he gently dips one finger inside me. He drags my slick arousal up to spread it over my clit, and I whimper softly.

"Fuuuuck," he murmurs. "You like that too, yeah?"

I nod, even though he's not looking at my face at the moment.

"What about this?" Still keeping up the slow, torturous circles with his fingertip, Malix turns his head a little and bites the inside of my thigh.

"Fuck! Shit!"

My upper body jerks off the bed as the unexpected jolt of sensation hits me like a bullet, and I can feel a gush of wetness seep from me in response.

"Oh, holy fuck," Malix groans. "How the hell was I ever supposed to resist you?"

He's been teasing me with his words this whole time, but I think those ones are meant more for himself than me. And as if to answer his own question, he settles his hands on my thighs again, holding them open as he

leans forward and buries his face between my legs.

While his exploration of me before was slow and gentle, this is the exact opposite. It's like he was holding out until he couldn't stand it anymore, and now that hunger that's been building in him is demanding to be fed. He laps at me, dragging his tongue all the way up and down my slit as he licks up every bit of the arousal that coats my skin.

My clit pulses harder and faster with every movement of his tongue, screaming out for attention as he licks my core.

"Malix," I gasp out, reaching downward to grab his head with both hands. "I need..."

Instead of telling him, I just show him, dragging his head upward a bit until his mouth is right where I want him. If he were Kian, he might resist me just to prove he can be more stubborn than I am, but Malix doesn't miss a beat. He follows my silent urging and attacks my clit with his tongue, rolling the flat of his tongue over the hard little button over and over, until I'm squirming on the bed.

My hands are still gripping his head, his hair rough under my fingertips, and I close my eyes as pleasure overwhelms my senses. He's so fucking good at this, and I don't know if it's a natural talent or because he's got an insatiable need to touch every part of my pussy with his tongue, but I don't really care at the moment.

All I care about is that he never fucking stops.

"Fuck, I'm close," I murmur, biting my lip as I angle my hips up toward his face a bit more.

"I can taste it, kitty," he mumbles back, his words hard to decipher as he barely lets up the movement of his tongue. "You gonna come all over my face? Let me feel you let go."

It's so close, the orgasm I want so badly hanging just out of reach. I shift my hips again, unable to stay still as little pinpricks of pleasure dance beneath my skin.

I open my eyes to look down at Malix—but as I do, I catch sight of someone else.

Kian.

He's standing in the doorway, his gaze locked on us and his eyes blazing.

The last time I saw him, his sculpted features were tight with anger, his entire body vibrating with it. But that's not what I see on his face now. His expression is still hard, but there's no fury in his burning eyes.

Just raw desire.

My mouth drops open, part from shock and part from a desire to say something. *Anything.*

But before I can, Malix switches up the pattern of his tongue, speeding up the strokes as he slips a thick finger into my pussy, curling it to press against my g-spot. And just like that, I explode. Pleasure lashes through my body like a whip, and all that comes out of my mouth is a ragged, breathless cry.

I bow off the bed again, my fingers digging into Malix's hair and my gaze still locked with Kian's. I couldn't look away even if I tried, and something about having him watch me fall apart under Malix's tongue just makes the orgasm last even longer, going on and on until I feel like my muscles might never unclench.

When the climax finally fades, I slump back down to the mattress, breathing hard. Malix gives another long swipe up the line of my pussy with his tongue, catching the fresh arousal that drips from me.

He presses the softest kiss to my clit, making me jerk slightly, then says, "Well, are you just gonna stand there?"

I blink, startled for a moment—until I realize he's not talking to me. I don't know when he realized Kian had entered the room, since he never looked up to see him the way I did, but he definitely knows his pack mate is here.

I'm still staring at Kian, so I can see the shadows of several different emotions pass over his face. He doesn't move though, just stays rooted to the spot right where he is, his nostrils flared wide and his arms crossed.

My heart, already racing from the intense orgasm, kicks up another notch, crashing against my ribs as I lick my lips.

"Well?" I murmur. "Are you?"

Still, Kian doesn't move.

Malix doesn't seem to have any plans to stop what he's doing, no matter what his brother does. His face is still buried between my legs, and he's gone back to his leisurely exploration of my pussy, dragging his tongue up and down my folds and over my clit in a lazy manner.

It makes it incredibly hard to focus, but Kian's fierce gaze is like a lightning rod, keeping me grounded in the moment, and all the possibilities it holds.

I swallow. The next words are harder to speak, but I force them out past the tightness in my throat, terrified of what I want but desperate to have it

anyway.

“Come here,” I whisper. “Please.”

I would never have thought Kian would be the type to respond to the word “please,” stubborn as he is. But it’s as if he was trapped in stasis, and that single word has suddenly broken him free.

He moves so fast it almost startles me, striding across the room and climbing onto the bed to kneel beside me on the mattress. With one hand, he palms the back of my head, lifting my upper body as he drops his head to meet my lips. His kiss doesn’t waste any time building up, going from non-existent to deep in the space of a second.

In response to his brother’s action, Malix starts eating me out like he means it again, using two fingers this time to fuck into me while his tongue drives me wild.

It all happens so fast that I don’t have time to brace myself for it or prepare for the overload of sensations. One hand comes up to clutch at Kian’s shoulder as the other digs into Malix’s scalp, and I come again, even harder than the first time.

The two of them carry me through it, holding my body still as I twist and writhe as if I’m trying to escape from the overwhelming pleasure. They push me higher and higher, drawing out the orgasm into a third one until the incredible sensations become too much for me to handle.

“Ah! Fuck!”

I tear my lips from Kian’s, squirming away from Malix, who finally lifts his head up from between my legs. His dark cheeks are tinted with a red flush, probably from the way my thighs kept trying to squeeze the shit out of him, or maybe from a lack of oxygen.

Kian lets my upper body sink back down to the mattress, gazing down at me with hooded eyes. Before I can lose my nerve or think too much about what this could all mean, I glance down at Malix.

“Get on the bed,” I command.

He grins as if he likes this bossy side of me—which, hell, he probably does. Pressing one last kiss to my swollen pussy, he leans back and rises to his feet, then crawls up onto the mattress on the opposite side of me from where Kian still kneels.

“Lie down,” I tell them, and I’m shocked when both men comply, lying back with heat burning in their eyes.

I pull my legs up and kneel between them, feeling a flush work its way up

my chest at the way their gazes trail over my naked body. I let that heat push me out of my own head as I slowly drag Malix's shirt off, then Kian's. I do their pants next, and the atmosphere in the room seems heavy and loaded with anticipation as I toss the garments down to the floor, leaving both men as nude as I am.

Their cocks are hard and thick, jutting upward and arcing toward their stomachs, and I feel a greedy sort of possessiveness as I look at them.

Wrapping one hand around each man's shaft, I slide my fists up and down slowly, running my thumbs over their heads to gather a bit of precum before gliding back down again. They both react, lying side by side but focused entirely on me as I jerk them off with deliberate movements.

My lungs feel tight, making it hard to get enough oxygen. My clit is so oversensitive that it needs a fucking break, but a different kind of arousal is building inside me, something deep and hungry that goes far beyond just physical pleasure or sex.

I want this. I've *been* wanting this, for longer than I care to admit.

My thighs press together a little, and I start moving my hands a little faster, dropping my head down every once in a while to lick or spit on their cocks, slicking the glide of my hands.

"She looks like a fucking goddess, doesn't she?" Malix murmurs roughly, and Kian grunts in response, thrusting up into my next stroke.

The burning arousal in my belly flares even hotter at his words, and I squeeze their shafts as I draw my hands upward, making them both groan.

I could come just from this, I think. Not the kind of orgasm like the ones I just had, but something that feels like it would overtake my whole body and consume me like a forest fire.

"Wait," Malix chokes out, shaking his head as he bites his lip. He grabs my wrist, stopping the movement of my hand, then drags it away from his cock.

I frown, disappointment rushing through me. *Fuck, maybe he's not as into this as I am.*

But then he grins, and it's so sinfully wicked that it sends a rush of desire racing through me. He sits up, scooting away from me before going up on his knees.

"Kian got to watch us before, kitty," he tells me, glancing down at his brother. "Now I want to watch you. I want to watch you go down on him while I fuck you. Will you do that for me? For us?"

Shit.

The thought of what he's suggesting leaves me so breathless with *want* that I can't even speak. So instead, I just nod fervently.

"Good." Malix smiles. "Get on your hands and knees between his legs. Put your mouth on him."

My gaze shifts to Kian, wanting to get a read on how he feels about this. He's watching me with that intense gaze of his, and although his expression is as hard as ever, the corners of his lips twitch upward, as if he's holding back a smile.

Keeping my hand wrapped around him, I adjust my position, kneeling between his legs and bending down to wrap my lips around his cock.

"Fuck," Kian mutters, reaching down to tangle his fingers in my hair.

It reminds me of the first time I went down on him, in that alley behind the bar when I had no idea who he was to me yet—just that this beautiful, enigmatic stranger made me feel things no one else ever had.

Maybe he's thinking of that night too, because as he looks down at me, there's something almost tender in his expression.

"I missed having your mouth on me," he says in a low voice.

I don't answer. My mouth is too stuffed full of his cock to get words out, and I'm not sure what I would say in this moment anyway. So I just keep bobbing my head up and down as I feel Malix settle into place behind me.

Malix's large hands grip my hips, and he pulses his hips forward and back a few times, sliding his cock through the folds of my pussy. "You ready for me?" he asks roughly.

I nod, the movement small but distinct. It's all Malix needs. He draws back again, but this time, instead of teasing me, he finds the entrance of my pussy and drives inside.

I gasp around Kian's cock, overwhelmed by the sudden feeling of being so full—not just of Malix, but of Kian too. Of *both* of them claiming me at the same time.

Malix must've gotten himself worked up while he was going down on me, because he fucks me like he can't hold back. Like he's already used up all of his self-control. In response, I suck Kian deeper into my mouth, swirling my tongue over the smooth skin of his cock as I hollow my cheeks. The harder Malix fucks me, the deeper I try to take Kian, until his cock is hitting the back of my throat.

"Fuck. That feels too good, baby," he murmurs, his other hand coming to

rest on my head too. “I can’t—oh, fuck.”

I can feel his control slipping too, and after a while, it seems to evaporate completely. Gripping my head, he drags my mouth up and down, forcing me to take him even deeper. My eyes water, and I have to fight down my gag reflex, but I dig my fingernails into his hips and let him take what he wants.

“Jesus, that’s hot,” Malix groans from behind me, pumping into me harder and faster.

I squeeze my eyes shut as sensations barrel through me, focusing only on this moment and not the crippling fear and sadness I felt before Malix came into my room.

Just this.

Just us.

When I come again, it radiates through my body in a hot rush, and Malix must feel the way I tighten around his cock.

“Fuck,” he grunts, pistonning his hips even harder. “Gonna come. Gonna —”

He cuts himself off with a groan, tightening his hold on my hips as he slams into me one more time. I feel the hot rush of his cum spilling into my pussy just a second before Kian’s cock thickens in my mouth.

“Amora!”

With a rough cry, Kian empties himself down my throat, his whole body shuddering with each pulse of his cock.

He releases his grip on my head as soon as I swallow the last bit of his release, and I suddenly realize I’m low on oxygen as I drag my mouth off his cock and suck in a deep breath.

Malix pulls out of me, slapping my ass lightly as his cum slides down my leg. I collapse onto the bed, sprawling out beside Kian, and Malix drops down on my other side.

All three of us are breathing hard, sweaty, disheveled, and messy. It occurs to me that I should clean up, but I can’t muster up the willpower to move. I was exhausted and strung out before, and now I’m exhausted, slightly less strung out, and sated.

“That was...” I mutter, but I have no follow-up. Coming up with the right words to describe it would take more brainpower than I currently have.

“Yeah.” Malix chuckles. “It was.”

My eyes drift closed. A few moments later, I feel the mattress shift. Then hands are on me, gently spreading my legs as a towel or something wipes up

the cum dripping from me. I can't open my eyes to see who the hands belong to, though. Maybe it's both men, or maybe it's just one of them. I don't know. But it feels good to be taken care of like this.

When the hands draw back, I turn over onto my side, and as the mattress dips again, warmth surrounds me.

I let it cocoon me as I drift off to sleep.

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AMORA

I WAKE up some time later sandwiched between Malix and Kian.

Kian's arm is heavy on my hip, his breath tickling the skin of my neck. Malix turned away from me at some point while we were sleeping, but he has one foot tucked behind him, wrapped around my ankles as if he doesn't want to let me go, even in his dreams.

The old me would have felt awkward as hell in this position. Pinned down. Burning up between their body heat. I'm no stranger to sex, but cuddling... not so much. I've always preferred my personal space.

It's not half bad though, really. There's something infinitely *safe* about being here with them. The sounds of their breathing in the dim room. Their unique scents of sunshine and whiskey mingling, both in the air and on my skin.

Too bad it can't stay this peaceful forever.

There's no clock in the room, but I can tell the sun has lowered in the sky outside the closed drapes because the dusk atmosphere inside the room has deepened. Frost's been downstairs alone for a while now. Probably hungry. And cold. The warmth of the two men on either side of me makes me feel guilty. While he's been down there, broken and alone, I've been up here, feeling pleasure instead of pain.

I can't let him be alone.

Kian and I might have come to an uneasy truce when he stepped into the room earlier, but I know he's still going to try to keep me from trying to bring Frost back. I can't let him do that.

I carefully slide out from under Kian's arm and extract my ankles from under Malix's foot. Moving slowly and slithering in a ridiculously snake-like

way, I make it off the bed without waking either of the men, then stand to gaze back at them. After I'm sure there are no signs of life, I tiptoe out of the room and head downstairs.

After slipping into the kitchen, I dig around in the cupboards, shoving aside cans of every kind of vegetable under the sun until I find a can of barbecued meat at the back of the pantry. The expiration date hasn't passed yet, so it probably won't hurt us. I imagine in Frost's current state, he's not going to be interested in Pop-Tarts or beans.

I upend the can into a bowl and heat it up in the microwave. Once it's lukewarm, I help myself to a few bites to assuage the gnawing hunger in my stomach, then I grab a wooden spoon with a long handle from the drawer and creep downstairs.

Frost is sleeping when I open the door. The sound of the lock turning doesn't wake him, but the moment the hinges creak like something out of a horror movie, he shoots to his feet and snarls at me.

The light pouring through the open door behind me slants across him, illuminating his face. Even wild, with his blond hair ragged and sweaty, his blue eyes dark, and his shadows warring across the expanse of his naked body, he's still beautiful. The blanket is crumpled uselessly under him, as if he doesn't even recognize that it's meant to keep him warm.

I walk farther into the room, and he growls viciously, lunging against his chains. The pipes overhead rattle precariously, but they hold. Regardless, fear sends my heart racing, and a cold chill prickles up the back of my neck.

There are shadows inside these men. All three of them. I've known it from the beginning. Hell, from the very beginning I thought the shadows were what made them evil. What would one day make them the catalysts for the end of the world.

But the thing is, I don't believe that's true anymore. I've seen who they are, even with the shadows raging inside them. There's more to them than the magic that lives restlessly beneath their skin.

Even Frost. Even now. He may be mindless and nearly mad from the darkness, but I know he's still in there.

I think of Malix earlier today, telling me they aren't meant to be loved, and it hurts me as much as if he'd insulted *me* instead of himself. We've only been in each other's lives a relatively short time, but what I know after that time is that they aren't *all* shadows, even when they believe they are.

Frost isn't lost. Not even now, overloaded with Quinton's monsters. My

onetime mate is still in there. My gentle, soft, quiet Frost. The man who has borne so much pain and still has the capacity for sweetness. He still exists inside this wild creature.

I just have to find him.

Holding the bowl tightly between my hands, I cross the floor until I'm just outside his grasp, and then I sit cross legged on the ground. Having him yank against his bindings and loom over me like a madman isn't exactly comfortable, but I figure if I come at this like I'm trying to get close to a scared dog, maybe he'll respond.

So I make myself seem smaller. Less of a threat.

"Are you hungry?" I ask, avoiding his gaze as I dip the wooden spoon into the shredded meat. It looks like some kind of luxury dog food, not meant for human consumption, but I'm familiar with the brand because we ate it back in my pack. Cheap, easy to cook, and it lasts forever. Living off the grid in the middle of nowhere doesn't leave a lot of options for fine dining.

Frost doesn't respond, but the tension in his body fades slightly. He sniffs at the air, and a dribble of saliva appears at the corner of his full lips.

Good. He's hungry.

I can work with this.

Slopping up a spoonful of meat, I hold it out, careful to keep the spoon at the very tips of my fingers. I finally meet his gaze, careful to only hold it for a second before I look at his lips instead. "Here. Have some. It's warm."

He backs away from the spoon, snarling, and ducks into the shadows behind the water heater.

I swallow my despair and hold the spoon up to my own mouth. "Look," I say gently. "Food." I peel off a small bite of the salty meat and chew, keeping the rest of my body still.

Frost blinks. Licks his lips. He crouches to the floor and eases forward on the balls of his feet. It's not even a human movement; it's like something an ape might do.

"I know you're in there," I murmur softly, offering the spoon again. "Come back to me. Please. I'm right here."

He leans forward, wrists cocked against the chains as he sniffs at the spoon. Then he flicks a wild-eyed gaze at me before chomping at the wood.

I pull the spoon back before he can yank it away with his teeth.

He chews madly, juices spilling over his chin and little pieces of shredded beef falling from his lips onto his bare knees.

“More?” I pick up another hunk of food and hold it out.

As if he’s immediately forgotten that the spoon holds food, he shrinks away from it, lashing out with his foot. I absorb the blow in my knee and gasp at the violence behind it, at the sharp, stabbing pain that lances up my thigh and into my hip.

Before he can kick me again, I scramble backward, out of range from his long legs, dragging the bowl with me.

He growls and flails around for several moments, kicking out at the water heater and the walls, dragging at his chains.

I just wait, trying not to cringe when his ankle bone slams into concrete or when his elbow hits the metal side of the water heater. He seems completely oblivious to any external pain, which terrifies me because it indicates that the internal pain is so deep he can’t feel anything else.

How the hell can I save him from this?

He finally calms, slumping on the concrete with his chained wrists tucked beneath his torso.

I scoot forward, careful to remain outside the range of his feet and hands, and offer him the spoon again.

“Did you know most fairytales are a lot darker than Disney makes them out to be?” I ask, saying the first thing that pops into my head in the hopes that my voice will help calm him.

Frost lifts his head and eyes the spoon, then opens his mouth. If he’s heard or understood my words, he makes no indication, but his gaze tells me he’s ready to eat.

I slip the spoon between his lips, dump the food, and yank it back before he can maul the wood. “Grimms’ fairy tales are terrifying. People die. People hurt each other. People are horrific beasts,” I say softly as I hold out another bite. “And good doesn’t always win.”

He opens his mouth and accepts the spoon, but this time his gaze isn’t on the meat—it’s on me.

Even if he can’t comprehend my words, he’s responding to my voice.

That has to be progress. I can’t let it be anything but progress.

Dipping the spoon back in the bowl, I go on. “*Beauty and the Beast* isn’t a Grimm fairy tale though. I’m not as well read as you, but I liked princess movies when I was a kid. We didn’t have many, and our television couldn’t run long on the generator, but *Beauty and the Beast* was my favorite.”

Frost puts his hands beneath him and gingerly sits up. I freeze, spoon

mid-reach, waiting to see what he's going to do next. But he just looks me deep in the eye and opens his mouth. His expression is wary, still slightly wild, and even a little confused.

Okay. Lean in, Amora.

"I know, I know, weird right? I'm not the kind of girl who likes princess shit," I murmur with a quiet chuckle, placing the spoon against his mouth. "I liked it because it seemed so unreal. This beautiful girl and this hideous beast. But they come together in this relationship where they have so much in common. Where she sees his sweetness and kindness beneath the beast, and he wants to be better for her."

Frost chews his canned meat, his growls quieting as his gaze lingers on me. Some of the humanity seems to be rising to the surface in him.

Or maybe that's wishful thinking.

"I hate that you and your brothers don't see your own kindness," I say softly, holding out the spoon again. "You're so much more than the shadows."

"Shadows."

The word falls from his lips, sounding so much like the Frost I know, that I startle and drop the spoon. We both look at it, lying between us amidst little pieces of discarded shredded beef.

"Pain," Frost says, holding out his arms and looking down at them with narrowed, saddened eyes.

But I realize the shadows aren't waving as fast as they were when I walked in.

Progress.

Don't stop now.

I reach for the spoon, but at the same time, he does too.

It almost seems like an automatic thing for him—like the gentleman I know is inside him has seen the fallen spoon and wants to pick it up for me.

His fingers land on the wooden handle, and mine land on his.

His skin is frigid.

We both pause. Frost's eyelids droop, and he studies me from beneath his long lashes.

"Frost?" I whisper.

The darkness in his irises fades, and his eyes widen. "Amora. What—" He cuts off, seeming almost strangled by his own emotions. His gaze darts around the room, then to the chains on his arms, before he looks back at me.

“You’re hurt,” he rasps. “Did I—”

“Shh.” I shake my head, tears clogging my throat as I wrap my fingers around his. “It’s okay. It doesn’t matter. Just stay with me. Don’t look back.”

“I can’t... remember.” He gasps the words, his breaths coming faster. He squeezes my hand, looking scared, devastated, and horribly confused. The riot of emotions in his eyes makes my heart almost stop beating. I want to take him in my arms and hold him so tightly that nothing can ever steal him away from me again.

Then the moment of lucidity vanishes in the blink of an eye.

His face twists into that wildness once more, and he grabs for me with a loud, angry snarl.

I manage to slide my fingers out from beneath his and fall onto my ass to crawl backward, skittering away from him like a crab so he can’t snag me with his other hand.

Frost roars. He picks up the wooden spoon and snaps it into two pieces, then throws them at me. The handle sails past my shoulder, while the meat-covered spoon slaps against my t-shirt. He stumbles to his feet and begins to fight against his bindings again, all hint of the Frost I know gone from his eyes.

I slide the bowl closer to him with my toes. As he lunges for it, burying his face in what’s left of the meat, I surge to my feet and hightail it out of the room. I lock the door and press my palms against the heavy wood, breathing hard, coming down from the sudden blast of adrenaline.

The bowl shatters against the door, shaking the wood beneath my hands.

I jerk away, my jaw tightening as I listen to his growls and grumbles continue inside the basement room. Listen to the chains clang and the pipes groan. Listen to him disappear back into the shadows.

Then I very carefully walk back upstairs, my throat burning, my chest aching, but determination seething through me like a promise.

I won’t give up on him.

Not ever.

MALIX

I OPEN my eyes to blinding morning light.

Squinting against the assault, I lift my head from the pillow and reach out to search for Amora and Kian. Both of them are long gone, given how cool the sheets are on the other side of the bed. The curtains are open, but only halfway, so that golden light pours through right over the bed. Amora doesn't do shit halfway, so it's obvious Kian did it to fuck with me because I didn't get up when they did.

Dick.

Dropping my head back to the pillow, I close my eyes and take a deep breath of their combined scents. The whole room smells like them. Smells like sex.

My cock twitches at the memory of Amora on top of me, under me. Surrounding me.

I reach down and rub my hardening cock with a satisfied grin. Having Amora is never short of phenomenal, but *fuck*. I've never experienced anything quite like last night. Sharing her with Kian heightened every sensation, like I could feel twice the pleasure ricocheting through her body.

It's no damn wonder I slept like the fucking dead.

I find my sweatpants on the floor, only to realize they're the ones Kian was wearing when he joined us last night.

Dammit. Motherfucker stole my pants. I slip them over my hips, my junk still pressing semi-hard against the gray cotton as I tie the knot double tight.

I'm sure when I find the two of them downstairs, they're both going to pretend nothing happened last night. They're one hundred percent alike in that way—two ostriches, heads buried in the damn sand, refusing to face

reality when they don't want to. They'll come together and then retreat back to their own corners like opponents in a boxing ring, always ready for the next fight. They'll dance around this shit until something happens to force them to recognize they're stuck with each other.

I give up on finding my shirt in the pile of pillows on the floor and leave the bedroom. The hallway is silent and empty, but I can hear the sound of clinking dishes in the kitchen. Sure enough, when I walk in, there's no cuddling to be found. Hell, they aren't even fucking looking at each other. The two of them are on opposite sides of the room, cooking their own meals with their backs to one another.

Jesus. I don't know why they keep kidding themselves.

Their feelings for each other are as obvious as the damn sun in the sky. As obvious as my feelings for her, and hers for me and Frost.

This thing between us is too big to be broken by a measly damn potion. We should've known that from the start.

Kian, who's standing over a pot on the stove, shoots me a glance over his shoulder. "About time you hauled your useless ass out of bed."

I give him my best shit-eating grin and make a beeline toward Amora. "Hey, when a guy's as fucking amazing in the sack as I am, he needs his beauty sleep."

Amora snorts, but I loop an arm around her waist, my fingertips sliding beneath the hem of her little shorts so I can palm her bare skin. Yanking her against my body, I let her feel just how happy I am to see her while I kiss her thoroughly.

She tastes like coffee and sugar with that decadent undertone of citrusy sweetness. It takes all my willpower not to rip her clothes off, bend her over the counter, and have my way with her. After what happened between us last night, maybe I shouldn't still feel as ravenous as I do, but what can I say? She brings out the beast in me.

By the time I pull away, she's breathing hard and her green eyes are the size of dinner plates, heat burning in their depths.

"Morning, kitty," I tease her in a low voice. Then, as the toaster ends its warming cycle and pops up, I snag a Pop-Tart. I wink at her, bite into the warm, gooey pastry, and stride over to the table.

Dropping into a chair, I shoot a grin at Kian. "I made breakfast for you yesterday. It's my turn to be waited on."

Amora still hasn't moved from where I left her. She seems stunned by my

casual display of affection, and I kind of like it.

There's plenty more where that came from.

"You changed shirts," I say, my eyebrows drawing together as I cock my head at her.

She blinks. "Uh. Yeah. The other one was dirty."

Her shirt wasn't dirty before I peeled it off her body last night, but I don't ask questions. Unlike Kian, I'm okay with my girl keeping secrets. Especially since I'm not stupid, and I know if her shirt got dirty, she did something she wasn't supposed to.

Like go downstairs to visit Frost.

I'm about ten minutes away from being hangry, so I inhale the Pop-Tart while Amora opens up another packet and heats up two more. Kian stirs something in a pan as he finishes cooking whatever concoction he's got on the stove. I lick my fingers clean and get up to go pour some coffee from the pot, but Amora meets me when I'm halfway across the kitchen.

"For you," she says, holding out the mug in her hand.

I accept it with another kiss, more chaste than our earlier one. "Thanks, kitty."

Her cheeks flush, and the hint of pink beneath her spring grass eyes makes her look even more beautiful. Like an old porcelain doll, the kind my mother had as a kid.

I don't even know where those dolls ended up, honestly. Quinton took everything from our mothers, including their belongings.

And their lives.

I return to my chair, and a moment later Amora sits beside me, offering me another Pop-Tart. Then Kian strides over and sets a bowl in front of me—some kind of meat and beans combo that looks entirely too much like horse shit.

Unfortunately, I'm a carnivore, and I'm fucking starving, so I dig in despite the unappetizing look. It's not half bad, honestly. I just don't want to know how long that meat's been in this house or how deep he had to dig to find it behind the dozens of cans of beans and vegetables.

We eat quietly for a little while, but the silence is too loaded to let it go on for long. Yesterday was a shitshow, start to finish, except for those couple hours after dark. From what Quinton did to Frost, to Kian's confrontation with Amora, to mind-blowing sex with both of them, a lot has happened in a short time. And every minute of it seems to weigh heavily over the table.

I swig some of the stale coffee, then wince at how bitter it is. Setting my mug down, I glance between the two of them. “All right. We need to discuss our next steps. But we need to do it *nicely*,” I add as Kian takes a breath and looks like he’s about to lay into Amora.

Amora doesn’t seem to notice. She picks off a corner of her Pop-Tart as she says, “We could leave the country. Take Frost and head to South America or something.”

“He’d find us,” Kian says gruffly.

None of us need clarification on who he means. Quinton has always kept close tabs on us, from the first moment he ever sent us on a quest to find a weak spot in the barrier between the shadow realm and earth. There isn’t a chance in hell he’d just let us travel south without sending reinforcements to bring us back.

Or kill us.

“Not to mention,” I add, “transporting Frost is going to pose a logistics problem.”

Kian nods, reaching for his mug. “He’ll have to be unconscious no matter what we choose to do.”

Amora looks agonized at the thought. “How many times can we knock him out before it has a negative effect on him? On his mind?”

Kian grunts. “Maybe there are some sedatives stashed away somewhere in the house.”

“Ibuprofen doesn’t even help us with a headache,” I point out. “Our metabolism isn’t going to let something like valium do its job. If that shit’s even around here.”

“Fair,” Kian says, his dark brows furrowed. “The alternative is physically knocking him out. But Amora’s right—that’s not a great option, and it risks hurting him even worse. The shadows are doing enough damage. He’s already fucked in the head.”

“Don’t say it like that,” Amora barks, eyes blazing and her fist tightening on her Pop-Tart. It crumbles beneath her grip, bits and pieces raining down to her plate.

I reach out beneath the table and grip her knee with a firm but calming squeeze. Catching her gaze, I say softly, “Down, kitty.”

She bares her teeth at me but then drops her gaze to her destroyed pastry.

Silence falls for a moment before Amora speaks up again.

“Do you guys know *anybody* who could help? Anyone who’s familiar

with the shadow realm or how the shadows work?”

I lean back in my chair, wrapping my fingers around my cooling mug. “Nah. Not anyone besides Quinton and Felicity.”

She looks thoughtful for a minute. “Well, we sought out a witch to help us against the shadow’s poison. So maybe a witch could help us with Frost’s predicament?”

I snort a laugh, although there’s no humor in it. “You really wanna play with the witches again? Look what happened last time. He sold us out to Felicity and promised you to her shadows.”

Her eyes narrow at me, but she forges ahead. “The witch who helped me find you after you left me *naked and broken in the mountains*,” she said pointedly, eyes narrowing, “might be able to help. She’s in Taos, down in New Mexico. Maybe we could start there?”

I shrug and look to Kian. “It’s as good a plan as any. What do you think?”

He doesn’t even look up from his bowl, just stays hunched over it, shoveling meat and beans into his mouth with an absence of emotion. “I doubt some random witch is going to be able to save Frost.”

Amora glares at him. “I know it probably goes against everything you believe in, but how about a little fucking optimism, huh?”

I huff a laugh, trying to diffuse the tension building between them. “Wait. Have you *met* Kia—”

Before I can finish my sentence, the back door blasts off its hinges with a crack like thunder.

All three of us jerk in surprise at the sound as deep black shadows pour into the kitchen, spreading out over the walls and cabinets. It happens quickly, as if someone put a recording on fast forward—one of those time lapse videos of the sun’s daily shadows streaking by at warp speed.

I leap to my feet, the chair falling backward behind me. One shadow slips away from the rest and heads right for me, so I throw up my arms to block it. The dark shape slams into my forearms, and I absorb the blow, grunting as it throws me back against the wall.

Amora lets out a curse, leaping up and darting away from the table, nearly tripping over her chair. I’m still vibrating from the hit I took against the plaster as she stumbles and falls at the mercy of the shadows.

Kian roars, leaping over the whole damn table like an Olympian athlete vaulting the bars. He slams into the ground, his legs on either side of Amora as he whips around to fight off the shadows.

“Felicity?” I ask, lashing out against one of the quickly moving dark shapes as it passes me.

Kian snarls, throwing a vicious uppercut at one of the other shadows. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

I pick up my fork, then leap over my fallen chair and sprint for one of the shadows hovering a few feet over Amora’s head. Lashing out with the silverware, I rake the fork across the shadow, and it screams in response. The sound is horrific, like nails on a chalkboard.

As I slash out again with Farmer John’s best silverware, I grunt, “We gotta remember to keep weapons at the dinner table.”

Kian lets out a sound of disgust and doesn’t bother responding.

Fucker just doesn’t get my sense of humor.

Amora scrambles away from the nearest shadows and slaps a hand on the counter over her head. She fumbles on the counter until she manages to get her fingers wrapped around the coffee pitcher, then she whips it out and tosses it at one of the shadows.

The pitcher slams against the wall in a hundred tiny shards.

The shadow doesn’t even notice.

I slam a palm against the shadow over her head, snatching it away before it can hurt her. It’s like putty against my fingers—solid but fluid, colder than a piece of ice. My own shadows flare wildly at their brethren’s proximity, but I grit my teeth and ignore the sudden roiling movement of my marks. Squeezing tightly, I jerk the shadow away from the wall and slam it onto the stove, while I use my other hand to turn on the burner. There’s a soft click, and then a small ring of flame flares up, making the shadow screech. I don’t release it until it catches fire.

I leave the shadow smoldering on the burner and leap away, searching for the next threat. A black shape slides down the fridge and darts toward Amora. She tries to grab it with both hands, but the shadow slips right through her fingers, unaffected by her grasp.

Fuck. I should’ve expected that. We’re made of shadows, so we’re able to fight them. Amora is useless against them. Which means we have to fight the ever-growing influx of shadows *and* keep her safe at the same time.

Kian snatches at one of the shadows and roars as he slams it into the kitchen table. All four legs collapse beneath the force, and he follows it down, his fingertips digging deep into the dark shape.

Unfortunately, we’re not going to get far if we don’t shift. We need teeth

and claws, not brute human strength.

So I let my magic roll over me.

My legs and arms lengthen, and my torso grows beyond the physical limitations of my human form. Shadows ripple around me, sliding off me like smoke, and all of my senses grow stronger, more potent. As my shadow wolf sight kicks in, I latch my gaze onto the nearest shadow and lunge.

I snatch at the shadow with my jaws and shake it wildly, trying to break it before I toss it against the wall. The shadow screams like a banshee, high-pitched and piercing, and then hits the drywall with a dull thwack. As it slides down the wall, I lash out at it with my paws. My claws cut into the billowing black smoke, and the dark form shreds into pieces.

“Nooooo,” the shadows hiss.

I straighten and glance around, startled by the strange chorus of voices.

They whisper again, a creepy as fuck sound. “He said you weren’t strong enough...”

I glance across the kitchen, catching Kian’s eye. He’s shifted too, and his giant shadow wolf form looms over the table. Amora has tucked herself into a corner of the kitchen, a fork in one hand and a knife in the other. Useless, given how she can’t do anything against the shadows.

He, I point out to Kian.

He nods grimly. Not Felicity, then. Quinton sent these.

Fury gives me a fresh rush of strength. I leap onto the lopsided table and reach for the shadow on the ceiling, snarling wildly. I can only guess that our old alpha has figured out how to harness the shadow power from the stone more effectively. He’s essentially swayed the shadows Felicity sent to his own side, commanding them for his own use.

I leap off the table and catch another shadow with my teeth. Before I can give it a shake to stun it, tendrils whip around my face and squeeze. Suddenly, I can’t fucking see—it pins my eyelids shut and closes around my snout. A cold slithery sensation slides inside my nostrils.

Stumbling backward, I search blindly for the wall. The first thing I find is the refrigerator, which works for me—metal is harder than drywall or plaster anyway. Tossing my head wildly, I start beating the shadow against the fridge. Each blow makes my head ring, but the third hit makes the shadow release me. I suck in a breath and then leap after it as it tries to get away.

Amora shouts something that I can’t quite understand over the ringing in my ears from my self-induced concussion. I latch on to the escaping shadow

and drag it toward the stove, where the burner is still smoldering with the remains of the last shadow I flambéed. Slamming the shadow on top of its melting compatriot, I wait a millisecond for it to catch on fire, then turn to help Amora.

Kian is on his back, trapped under five different shadows and rolling around like a turtle who can't get up. Despite the overwhelming appearance that he's in trouble, I can tell he isn't, so I bypass him and bound across the kitchen on all four paws. Amora is crouching behind the broken table, both hands batting at a shadow crawling over her hair.

I skid to a stop next to her and latch on to the shadow, hauling it off her. Opening my jaws, I try to throw it across the room, but it holds tight to my teeth. I snap my jaws shut and tear into it, then spit it out on the floor.

As I straighten, Kian does as well. He's still battling at least three shadows, while more are pouring through the door, oddly stark in the sunshine. He stumbles back, falling under the weight of the creatures, and I watch as his giant bulk slams into the basement door.

The whole thing explodes into matchsticks under his weight. He and the three shadows vanish into the darkness beneath with a series of painful sounding thuds.

A split second later, from the cellar room beneath us, Frost roars.

It's not a human sound. It doesn't even sound like a regular wolf. That's his shadow wolf roar.

Oh shit.

The beast is loose.

Things just got way more complicated.

AMORA

IN THE SILENCE after Frost's angry roar, Malix whips his large head around, his toothy jaw opening in a look of shock. Then he throws himself in front of me right before a commotion on the stairs indicates someone is coming up. I hear snarling, growling, the skittering of giant claws on wood, and several big crashes from the darkness below.

Then Frost's shadow wolf leaps from the dark recesses of the basement, wisps of dark magic trailing behind his body, remnants of his transformation. He flies through the air in a smooth arc, his bulk taking up an ungodly amount of space in the small kitchen, and he lands so hard that the house shakes beneath his paws. His glowing blue eyes turn on us, flashing like the burning hot core at the heart of a flame.

But he doesn't attack.

Not us, anyway.

Frost launches himself at the nearest shadow where it spreads like an oil spill on the scratched wooden floor. He leaps onto it, claws digging, teeth snapping. He's like a starved wolf unleashed—biting, scratching, growling, snarling, taking out his anger on the shadow with devastating consequences. He tears right through the black shape, leaving gouges in the floor. The creature falls into shreds and evaporates, although Frost doesn't wait around to see it disappear before he chooses his next victim.

Malix and I remain frozen, watching as Frost snags another shadow off the wall and rips into it. He leaps onto the kitchen sink, his claws scraping at the metal for purchase. Another shadow monster is torn from the cabinets and absolutely annihilated in his jaws.

More shadows pour into the kitchen from the outside. The more that

come in, the darker the kitchen appears, despite the bright daylight outside. Frost bats a shadow off the ceiling, and it screeches with that bone chilling sound I've heard before. Kian bounds up the stairs from the lower level, shaking off whatever blow he took in the fall, and halts abruptly at the top of the steps, staring at Frost on top of the counters.

Kian's large head rotates to look at me and Malix as if to say, *What the actual fuck?*

But he doesn't wait for either of us to acknowledge him—he just leaps back into the battle. A split second later, Malix does, too, leaving me alone with the broken table.

I clutch my useless-ass fork and spoon like they're going to do shit against the shadows and watch the coordinated violence unfolding around me. Even though Frost doesn't seem aware of Kian and Malix even being beside him, they're still able to dance around him, snatching at spare shadows when they break free from his powerful jaws.

Frost is a force of nature. He leaps off the walls and slams into counters, mowing through the shadows ferociously. He fights like a wolf possessed, decimating the shadows so thoroughly that my gaze can hardly keep up with him.

He pounces on a larger shadow hovering near the door that passes into the hallway. His giant, muscular shoulders slam into the doorframe, splintering the solid wood on either side, and he falls through, taking the shadow down onto the hardwood floor. Kian and Malix leap after him, growling as they snatch at more of the monsters surrounding their brother. All three wolves clatter across the floor, vanishing into the hallway.

In the sudden, abrupt silence, I realize the kitchen is bright again—there are no more shadows slipping through the open back door and gliding like black voids across the walls. The ones the three shadow shifters haven't yet killed, they've chased into the foyer.

I shove against the wall and stand, stumbling a bit in my haste to chase after them. My silverware "weapons" drop to the floor as I leap over broken table legs and race out of the kitchen. Damn things were fucking useless anyway.

When I pause in the crooked doorway, I have to duck as remnants of a destroyed shadow are tossed right toward me. Frost slams into the stairwell bannister and the carved wooden columns collapse beneath him. He snatches at two more shadows and tosses his head violently, then immediately leaps

back to his feet.

He barrels through a cluster of shadows, slams into the locked front door, and the whole lot of them fall into the sunshine while turning the solid oak door to kindling. Kian and Malix follow on his heels, and the shadows clear out, following the fight into the yard.

I leap over debris from the door and hit the porch running, taking the front steps two at a time as I chase them into the yard. The grass is warm and soft beneath my bare feet, and my wolf perks up with the hope that I'm about to shift. But I don't. I'm helpless to do anything to assist them in the fight, either in wolf form or human, but I refuse to cower. I want to be here in case there's anything I *can* do.

As the fight rages, movement in my periphery catches my attention, and my heart jolts, worried that another shadow is sneaking up on us.

I whip my head to one side, realizing as I do that it's not a shadow at all. It's a human walking around a neighboring farm. He's pretty far away, just a silhouette beneath the blazing sun as he walks toward his old barn, but the sight of him makes my stomach twist into a knot. He raises a hand to cover his eyes and stares our way. I can't see his expression, but it's obvious he's seen us.

Exactly what we *don't* want to happen. Three giant black wolves and a human loitering around an abandoned farmstead? There's not a chance in hell he isn't going to call the cops.

The farmer backtracks, circling back toward his house, although he keeps glancing over his shoulder at us.

Fucking fuck. That's going to bite us in the ass later.

Frost yips, and the sound makes me tear my gaze away from the retreating farmer. The last shadow vanishes in a puff of smoke at Frost's feet, and he looks up, his eyes blazing bright blue as he seeks us out.

I can see immediately that he's still not in his right mind. He may have broken free of his chains and come out swinging against the shadows, but inside his head, he's still being driven mad by those same damn monsters.

I'm only a few feet behind Kian and Malix, who have preemptively placed themselves between me and Frost. In an instant, I see the trouble coming—his broken mind, his attack, his brothers defending me. One or more of them getting hurt.

Or dying.

Frost lunges forward with another bone-shaking snarl, but this time, he's

coming for us.

No!

That desperate thought propels me into motion before I realize I'm moving. I refuse to let him hurt Malix or Kian. I refuse to stand by and watch the three of them fight again, because this time, his brothers might kill him.

I run past Malix and Kian, the soft ground sinking beneath my bare feet, and throw myself in front of them.

Frost slams into me at full speed.

I feel the force of it in every part of my body. Every bone in me rattles from the impact, and I fly off my feet. I slam into the ground hard, throwing one arm over my head in an automatic attempt to save my head from flattening on the dirt. My arm absorbs much of the second impact, and I thank Grady for those karate lessons when I was a kid. He always warned me little wolf girls needed to learn how to fight and defend even without their teeth, and thank God for that beer-guzzling, protective old man.

Frost follows me down, snarling as he pins me to the ground.

My fight-or-flight screams at me to run. His teeth, his growls, his bulk, the lack of anything that makes him Frost in his eyes... it's all terrifying.

But when I promised I wouldn't give up on him, I meant it.

So I'm sure as hell not running now.

I wrap my arms around his neck and bury my face in his fur.

I cling to him, eyes closed, trying to show him who he really is by reminding him he's not alone. Digging my fingers into his fur, I try to push positive emotions into him with my thoughts. The two of us in the library at Eric the witch's house. The two of us in bed, exploring each other, loving each other. Memories of traveling with his brothers, and of the moment he leapt on Quinton's gun to save my life.

I feed him everything I can, and after a moment, it feels *real*. Like actual energy is seeping from me and into him. I don't know what the hell it is, or if I'm just imagining it, but I keep it up anyway. Everything good and beautiful that I have for him, I offer it freely through our connection.

Nobody moves. The air goes still, and Frost's snarls slowly fade away. He breathes in my arms, soft inhalations and exhalations, then after what seems like an eternity, he shakes his head.

His body ripples and shifts. He shrinks, and his fur begins to retract, leaving me gripping his smooth, warm skin. I release him just enough to let my head rest on the ground and stare up at him as he completes his

transformation.

Back to human.

Back to Frost.

He blinks his glowing blue eyes one last time, and then they're just his eyes again. Piercing. Haunted. Questioning.

The tension between his brow smooths, his expression clears, and then he falls onto me.

His strong arms snake around me, and he buries his face in my hair, breathing deeply. His breath tickles my ear, and he nuzzles my cheek before he pulls back to kiss me.

He captures my lips and steals my breath away, devouring me with the same ferocity he just displayed while tearing through the shadows. I wrap my legs around his waist and sink my hands into his feather-soft hair, opening to his kiss, to the weight of his body on me.

It's an intimate moment, and a part of me can sense Malix and Kian standing nearby, watching. But I'm not embarrassed by their attention. In fact, if anything, it feels right that they're here with us to witness this moment. The bond isn't gone. Maybe it's not a true mate bond anymore, but *something* connects us to each other. It's something all three of us share, something that involves us all.

Besides, I don't think I could pry myself away from Frost in this moment even if I wanted to.

I have him back.

He's safe.

He's mine.

And I'll do whatever it takes to keep him here.

AMORA

BY THE TIME the sun begins to set, we've boarded up the two broken doors, as well as strengthened our defenses on the other entrances. Not that a few two-by-fours and nails will keep out the shadows, but at least if they have to break through solid wood, we might hear them coming this time.

The boards give us a second reasonable defense, as well. I know without a doubt that the neighboring farmer called someone after what he saw. We have no way of knowing if someone's going to show up to check on the place, but at least if they do, they won't be able to get in easily either.

We debated leaving the house immediately after the fight earlier for obvious reasons. First and foremost because we'd been seen, but also because the shadows had found us. And quickly, too. Much more quickly than we'd expected.

But Frost's condition is still... unstable. For safety's sake—his and ours—we decided to stick around one more night and hope for the best. We have food, a roof over our heads, and time to figure out our next move. If a human shows up to check on the property, that'll be easier to deal with than the shadows, at least.

Not to mention, Frost didn't exactly leave a single shadow *alive* to report back to their tyrannical handler. Chances are Quinton doesn't actually know where we are. At least not yet, thanks to Rambo the Shadow Wolf who broke his chains and laid waste to all of Quinton's little pets who found us.

The remnants of our makeshift dinner are still spread across the coffee table in the dark living room. Turning on lights wouldn't be smart, but that's the nice thing about being a shifter. Seeing in the dark is like a sixth sense.

I'm curled on Frost's lap with his fingers tangled in my hair and his other

arm wrapped around my waist, holding me tight against him. He hasn't stopped touching me since he came out of the shadows. Not that I'm complaining. I don't want him to stop touching me either. It's a reminder for me that he made it—he survived and he came out of the dark when we weren't sure he could. I'm absolutely certain the contact between us is playing a part in keeping him from sliding back into madness.

I'm a literal tether to his sanity.

So despite the fact that I've never been a woman who likes to snuggle, I just want to burrow in his arms and stay here forever. I'll stay as long as he needs me.

At the other end of the small, lumpy couch, Malix puts a hand on Frost's ankle and gives his leg an affectionate shake. "You have enough to eat, man?"

Frost nods, his chin shifting the hairs at my neck. "It was enough. Thank you."

Malix winks at me and flashes a smile. "There's our guy."

Kian sits in the chair across from us, eyeing Frost warily. Both of his brothers have been watching Frost like hawks, as if at any minute he might switch back to being wild and violent. Despite their obvious concerns, however, their relief is pretty clear too. Like me, they started thinking he was lost to them forever, and this is a tentative kind of peace formed from their unconditional love for him. That's the thing about a familial bond, especially when it's a bond you chose yourself—that love will always be stronger than any other emotion or worry.

"We need to discuss the..." Kian waves a hand in Frost's general direction, his jaw tightening a bit. "You're not cured."

The reminder slashes through me. I slide my fingers over Frost's arm where the shadows have finally calmed, moving sluggishly over his skin. His fingers dig into my side, and even though it hurts a little, I don't complain.

I can be his stable ground.

"You're right. I'm not," Frost replies carefully. "They... they're still with me."

Kian nods. He doesn't look mad, or like he's blaming Frost for anything that's happened, but the matter-of-factness in his tone leaves no room for interpretation.

He thinks Frost is a threat.

My jaw clenches with protective irritation.

Frost has only *just* come through the nightmare of being overtaken by the darkness inside him. If Kian's overly protective fear-mongering sends him spiraling back into the shadows, I'm going to kick his ass, rip his arms off his ridiculously muscular body, and beat him over the damn head with his own fists.

But before I can shoot him a death glare to warn him to shut up, Kian continues. His tone is a bit more gentle this time, as if he's realized all on his own that maybe Frost needs us to have a bit of faith in him right now.

"You have a handle on them for now," he tells his brother. "That's good. But what will happen if they rise up?"

"Yeah," Malix agrees, his smile fading. "We don't want to lose you again."

Frost is silent for a moment, then he shakes his head. "I don't know what will happen if they try to take over again. But I'll do my best to be prepared."

"We'll be with you," I add softly, wrapping my fingers through Frost's and pushing more of my energy out toward him. I can feel it flowing through the connection, or bond, or whatever it is that connects us like an invisible thread. "We won't let you go back to that place."

Malix changes the subject, probably because he can sense the tension hovering in the air and wants to give Frost a break from thinking about his brush with insanity. "I can't believe Quinton's shadows found us. That fucker is getting way too good at controlling those damn things."

"Quinton?" Frost asks. "He sent the shadows?"

Malix tosses his arm over the back of the couch and kicks his feet up on the coffee table. "Yeah. We thought Felicity had sent them at first, since she's done it before. But the shadows said otherwise."

I eye him, confused. "The shadows spoke? I heard them hissing, but I must've missed the words in all the chaos."

Malix nods. "Yeah. They said something about how 'he' told them we wouldn't be strong enough to fight them." His grin widens. "Proved the asshole wrong, didn't we?"

Kian grunts. "Frost did, anyway." Leaning forward, he picks up his coffee mug as he adds, "Quinton is gaining power at an alarming rate."

"While Felicity is obviously losing control of the few shadow minions she managed to summon," Malix points out.

Nodding, Kian lifts one shoulder in a shrug. "Makes sense. She's less willing to use shadow magic than he is. And she doesn't have the stone, so I

honestly don't know where she got the power to do the small amount of shadow magic she's done."

The thought of Quinton's stone—an actual piece of the shadow realm, imbued with all the dark power of that world—sends a chill up my spine.

"He's obviously learned how to extract magic from that stone he got from the shadow realm more effectively," I say. "We need to deal with him before he gets even more powerful."

Malix nods. "And before he makes an army of violent, shadow maddened shifters." He snorts wryly, scrubbing a hand over his short dark hair. "Isn't it funny how we used to think Felicity was the enemy? She's a fucking cake walk compared to that asshole."

His comment sparks a sudden thought in my mind, and I sit up a little straighter, feeling Frost react to the change in my posture.

"Felicity," I blurt out, my mind churning a mile a minute.

Kian and Malix both raise an eyebrow at me, and even though I can't see Frost's face, I somehow know he's doing the same.

Malix cocks his head at me. "Yeah? What about her, kitty?"

"We should go to Felicity for help," I explain, speaking my thoughts aloud as the idea takes deeper root in my mind. "What's that saying? The enemy of my enemy is my friend? Or something like that. If we join forces with Felicity, we could work together against Quinton. And she might even be able to help with Frost's... problem."

Behind me, Frost stiffens at the mention of his shadows.

Kian barks a short laugh. "You can't be serious. Felicity has been against us for years. Why would she work with us?"

"Things change," I point out with a shrug. "People change. You never thought your old alpha would be your enemy, did you?"

Kian's expression doesn't change, but he inclines his head in silent agreement.

"We never thought the four of us would become allies," I say. "Even more than that. Friends. Lovers."

There are other words I could use for what we are, but I clamp my lips closed around them, keeping them locked away.

Malix glances over at me as if he's plucking those words straight out of my brain anyway. Something passes through his features, and he shoots a look at Kian. "She's got a point, bro."

But Kian shakes his head. "There's no evidence that Felicity is strong

enough to help Frost. Whatever source of shadow magic she took from Quinton when she left is obviously failing her now, since he's managed to harness her shadows for his own means."

"There's no evidence she *isn't* strong enough either," I say firmly. "We need help, whether you like it or not. She commands a pack, and her interests align with ours. She's our best option."

Malix nods. "She might be our *only* option."

Suddenly, our conversation is interrupted by twin beams of light that cut across the living room walls.

I stiffen and go on high alert, attuning all my senses to the world outside the boarded up farmhouse. Gravel cracks and crumbles beneath tires as a car pulls up the drive.

"Shit," Kian mutters, surging to his feet. "Get under cover. All of you."

I slip off Frost's lap and take his hand, tugging him off the couch after me. He lets me take the lead without question, following silently behind me as we pass into the foyer and head for the coat closet near the front door. I don't wait to see what Malix and Kian do or where they go; I just close the door lightly behind us and crouch in the darkness with Frost.

His fingers circle my waist as we wait together, both of us barely breathing. Even through the walls of the house, I can hear the car come to a halt and a door slam. Heavy footsteps wander up the driveway, then the porch shivers under the approaching individual as whoever it is makes their way toward the door.

A low, staticky sound meets my ears, followed by a tinny voice saying, "Radio to 359, copy on your twenty."

A cop, I realize, and slide my fingers over Frost's. I don't know how he's going to react to a figure of authority.

Please don't try to come in, I silently beg the police officer.

Swallowing hard, I press my head against the wall and listen. Frost's small, shallow breaths brush across the skin of my bare shoulder, and he presses his lips there, almost as if to steady himself.

Outside, a thick country accent speaks up. Male. Deep.

"Son of a... what the hell happened here?" More footsteps creak across the porch, coming closer to our location, then bypassing us and heading toward the windows outside the living room. A moment later, the officer bounds down the stairs, and his footsteps move off into the grass around the side of the house.

“Leaving?” Frost whispers.

I shake my head. “Not yet.”

We vibrate with tension but remain frozen on the floor of the closet. What will happen if the cop tries to come in? Obviously, he’ll have to break through the boarded up doors—or maybe even break through a window, instead. And I don’t know what we’ll do if he does. We *are not* murdering a human just for our own safety.

I’m formulating a plan in my head that includes busting past him in our shifter forms and taking off into the night, when he returns, his footsteps crunching on the rough ground as he comes around the side of the building. He speaks up, his voice ringing out through the evening.

“Hey, yeah, Chief? I’m out here at your grandaddy’s place. Leon Needmore called us earlier with a crazy story... Oh, you heard? Yeah, the place is beat to shit. Someone’s boarded up both the front and back door, and there’s a couple broken windows. What you wanna do?”

I fight the urge to groan. So not only did we get caught, we got caught at the chief of police’s grandaddy’s abandoned farm.

Fucking hell.

“Nah, it’s empty,” the officer goes on, his tone seemingly unconcerned. “Shone my light through the windows that didn’t have the curtains closed, everything looks quiet.”

Good. That means we all managed to get hidden before Barney Fife rolled up on us. Thank goodness we closed the living room drapes so he couldn’t see our leftovers sprawled across the coffee table.

There’s another pause as he listens to the man on the other end of the line. “Sure, boss. I’ll call Kevin and have him meet us out here first thing tomorrow with the right tools. My guess is some hooligans decided to have a party and tried to cover their tracks. If you’re sure there ain’t nothin’ here to be stolen, I’ll head out.”

I ease back against Frost’s chest, some of the tension draining from my body as the officer’s boots crunch farther away. A moment later, his car door opens and then closes. His engine roars, and his tires creep away, vanishing into the silent night.

Frost and I remain where we are, listening intently to the sound of the cop car fading into the distance.

Then the closet door slams open, startling us both.

Frost growls protectively and throws his arms around me, tugging me

back into the shadows beneath the few hanging coats above us.

Kian eyes us, his expression hard. “Time’s up. We leave before dawn. Let’s get some sleep.”

“Leave to go where?” I challenge.

He rolls his eyes and walks away, leaving the closet door standing open behind him. But his voice floats back to us as he heads for the stairs.

“We’re going to pay a visit to Felicity.”

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KIAN

DAWN COMES TOO FUCKING SOON.

I've spent the night tossing and turning, too focused on the threat of the cops returning before we clear out to get any semblance of sleep. Since Amora tried to use the coffee pot as a weapon yesterday, caffeine is out of the question, so by the time we pack some essentials, shift, and set out, I'm more than ready for a good run to clear my head.

We head north, our sights set on Wyoming. Last we heard, thanks to Quinton's obsessive need to keep tabs on his ex, Felicity's pack had set up camp in the southern part of the state.

Worry for Frost eats at me like acid flowing through my veins as we start to make our way across the landscape. Even with Amora staying so close to him that they look like they're glued together, it's never far from my mind that he's one bad moment away from reverting back into a mindless beast made of fury and pain. It's a long haul from Colorado to Wyoming on foot, and we can't spend the whole trip sprinting flat-out. Not with Frost in his condition.

Anything could happen on this journey.

I have to be fucking ready.

The first couple days of travel are fairly uneventful, which I'm grateful for. We're not going as fast as I'd like, but at least we're all holding up all right. Or, *mostly* all right.

You know what I miss? Malix says through mind speak on our second day, giving an exaggerated sigh. Our paws crunch on a thick bed of leaves in an unoccupied swath of forest in the northern portion of Colorado. *Burgers.* A *big fat juicy burger smothered in grilled onions.* *Pop-tarts and old cans of*

beans just don't cut it.

I roll my eyes and glance at Frost for the hundredth time. Amora's lithe dark brown wolf brushes against his larger white wolf, the two of them nearly tripping over each other as they walk. They stride shoulder to shoulder, and her attention is obviously on him more than anything around her. Despite the fact that we're more traceable in our normal wolf forms, it made more sense for Frost to just be a wolf and not his shadow wolf—both to keep him from being too overwhelmed by the shadows, and so he could travel at a slower speed with Amora to keep him sane.

I'm not jealous of her constant attention or the way she sticks so close to him. Just... worried.

Seriously, Malix says disgustedly. *Who the hell stocked that damn pantry? Or maybe they took all the good stuff with them when they left the place. Which is just fucking rude, if you ask me.*

I ignore his ranting. As usual, he's falling back on his humor to keep the atmosphere light. I don't hate him for it. Nothing about this situation is "light" or easy. Frost is hanging on to a mere thread of sanity, and Amora serving as the tether for him isn't a sustainable plan. And seeking out Felicity, of all fucking people? We were programmed to hate her from the moment she left Quinton, and now we have to overcome years of brainwashing in order to ask her for help.

The hole we're in just gets deeper by the day.

Amora's laugh cuts into my thoughts through our mind speak connection. *We're lucky there was any food there at all. Especially since hunting wasn't really an option. It could've been worse. It could've been dozens of tins of sardines or something.*

Malix lets out a soft yip. *Hey, sardines have their place in the world. Although not on pizza. Never on pizza.*

Amora's wolfish grin widens, her mouth hanging open as her tongue lolls out one side. She bumps her shoulder affectionately against Frost but speaks to Malix. *Do you ever think of anything other than food?*

Sex, Malix replies without missing a beat.

I shake my head, amused in spite of myself. If there's anything consistent in our world, it's Malix's sense of humor. He may drive me up a fucking wall most days, but that's just because he's like a younger brother to me.

I wouldn't change him. Not for anything.

But other things *do* change. People change.

Felicity might have changed too.

Just like I have.

For so long, I was a slave to Quinton's purpose. I didn't know any better. I had no reason to question him, no moral reason to stand against him, and the shadows inside me—the darkness—compelled me to follow his orders with little thought involved. We were raised to never question what we were created to do. His purpose was our purpose.

But now... now I have a new purpose.

Her.

I glance over at Amora again, careful to keep it surreptitious. I haven't fully come to terms with any of this yet. The depth of my feelings for her unnerves me, especially given the fact that the potion Erik gave us was meant to destroy the bond entirely.

It's become *very* obvious that the bond hasn't broken. I can't deny the connection between us, or the way some kind of unbreakable thread seems to weave through all of us. So either the witch didn't bother making a potion that would actually work since he was going to sell us out anyway, or the bond was just too strong to be severed.

Or maybe this isn't even the mate bond anymore. Maybe it's something stronger. Something that I can't fight, even if I wanted to.

We stop at a river just before we reach the Wyoming state line and hydrate, then walk a few more hours before we camp for the night. It follows like that for a couple of days—traveling, talking, keeping an eye on Frost, and all the while, closing the distance between us and Felicity.

Somewhere in the dead ass middle of nowhere on the third day, Malix says, *Hey, Kian, do you remember that game we played when we were kids?*

I cock my head in his direction. *Which one?*

I spy, he answers, shaking out his black fur. *Remember? I spy with my little eye... something yellow.*

Jesus fucking Christ. I am not playing I spy, I groan wearily. *Our lives are in danger, and we're marching toward a woman who was once our sworn enemy. I spy is a dumb ass game.*

Amora huffs out a breath, shooting me a narrow-eyed look. *There's nothing wrong with I spy. Lighten up. Just because you've got a stick up your ass, that doesn't mean the rest of us have to shove one up ours too. I'll play with you, Mal.*

I grit my teeth, but I can't be mad at her. Hell, maybe I *do* need to lighten

up.

Still, after three hours of listening to them go back and forth, even Frost starts silently begging me to shut them up. At least he's got my back.

We break as often as we need to for rest, and especially when Frost's energy seems to flag. He seems to be constantly fighting the shadows inside him, even in wolf form, so despite his fury and strength in the battle back at the farmhouse, this journey wears him out fast and often.

Between the frequent breaks and the necessity to move slow so Amora can maintain constant contact with Frost, it takes us longer than I'd like to make real progress toward Felicity's pack. Luckily, though, nothing comes after us—none of Quinton's minions and no more shadows. I don't know whether to be thankful he can't seem to find us... or to be worried that the seeming calm indicates that something larger is coming.

As we make our way across Wyoming, the landscape changes a bit. We travel through the foothills and then deeper into the mountains, passing through areas that are more sparse and rocky, as well as spots where trees grow thick around us.

Finally, we breach the perimeter of Silver Crest pack lands.

Our old pack is called the Blood Moon pack, although I've always just thought of it as "Quinton's pack." But when his mate decided to split off since she couldn't support what Quinton was doing, she gave a new name to her small band of wolves—Silver Crest.

The energy in the air changes as we step past the perimeter, and the pack's territorial scent markings overwhelm my senses. It's a slightly uncomfortable feeling, meant to send outsider shifters running in the opposite direction if they accidentally step foot into Felicity's territory. But we press forward, moving slowly, and I keep my eyes peeled on the flat, rocky landscape.

Her wolves likely already know we're here.

We barely make it half a mile into Silver Crest territory before several large wolves appear on the horizon. Five of them, then eight, then ten, sprinting so quickly across the rough ground that they drum up waves of dirt and debris. Even from a distance, I can hear their defensive growls.

My hackles rise, and I brace for the confrontation.

AMORA

As FELICITY's scouts race toward us, my heart surges into my throat, fluttering like a trapped animal and making it hard to breathe.

But we've already discussed this. Every evening for the past few nights, when we made camp to rest, we carefully talked over the plan for what we would do when we finally reached her pack territory. Even though the moment is dangerous, and I don't know whether we're going to be able to convince these shifters to listen to us, I'm ready for it. We discussed the best methods for de-escalating the situation and looking as non-threatening as possible, so we're prepared.

I let the change ripple over me, and my wolf recedes back inside my body, leaving me entirely naked and exposed. Holding my head high, I keep my fingers on Frost's back as he shifts to human form alongside me. He straightens, shaking his head as the change rolls through him. Once his soft white fur transforms to smooth golden skin, I tuck my fingers around his elbow and press against him. The black shadows that paint his body give an irritable wave but then calm down.

On my other side, Kian and Malix morph from wolf to human, and the four of us stay firm and outwardly calm. Standing our ground as the snarling wolves race toward us.

We won't have much time to convince the pack that we're not here to hurt them—if they give us any time at all—but by being in human form, we can make the obvious statement that we didn't come to start a fight.

Of course, the fact that all three of my companions are covered in shadow markings doesn't give us much of a leg to stand on.

Those shadows immediately mark them as the enemy.

We just have to convince Felicity's pack otherwise. That won't be easy, considering Felicity probably knows damn good and well that her ex wouldn't hesitate to send spies onto her lands. For all she knows, we're working for Quinton.

It'll be an uphill battle to convince her she can trust us.

Hell, if I were her, I wouldn't fucking trust us.

The wolves draw closer. I can feel their thunderous footsteps through the ground beneath my bare feet. Frost's muscles tense beneath my fingers, and I squeeze him just enough to draw his attention away from the wolves.

"Look at me," I murmur, keeping my gaze firmly on the advancing pack. "Don't think about them. Look at me."

In my periphery, his handsome, enigmatic face turns toward me. He's eerily still in his usual statue mode, but I can feel his emotions through the connection we share. The moment his gaze lands on me, the tension flees and affection warms through our bond.

"Don't look away," I tell him softly.

I know it's hard for him to obey, especially with ten furious wolf shifters hauling ass toward us, looking like they're ready to attack. But I don't want to take the chance that the stress of the encounter will send him right back into the shadows. I didn't think we'd get him out the first time; I'm afraid a second descent into madness might be permanent.

Even with several feet of space between me and the other two men, I can sense the tension hanging in the air. Kian's attention is split between the approaching pack and Frost as his muscles tighten like coils, ready for anything.

Of course he's too stubborn and dominating to *not* look like he wants to take their heads off. The man is a walking force of nature, and that's not really something he can turn off at will, even when he's trying to give off the impression that he's standing down.

Sliding my arm through Frost's until our elbows are locked together, I hold up both of my hands in a gesture of peace. Our plans include *me* handling first contact with Felicity's pack. No one has ever called me soft or cuddly, but compared to the three feral shifters, I'm the closest we're going to get. I'm smaller, with less of an overall "I'm going to kick your ass" look.

Before the Silver Crest pack gets close enough to launch an attack, I raise my voice over the thundering of their paws. "We come in peace! We're not here as enemies!"

The wolf at the head of the small group immediately puts on the brakes. His paws skid across the dirt, sending rocks flying, and he comes to a halt about ten feet away. His companions follow suit, kicking up more debris as they stop short on either side of the wolf in charge.

It's not Felicity, because it's a male wolf. Huge and red-furred, with brilliant green eyes. He cocks his giant head at me as silence stretches out over the rocky landscape around us.

Frost's gaze bores into me. I know the Silver Crest wolves probably find it strange, maybe even alarming, that he's looking at me instead of them. But it's for their own good.

If he falls back into the darkness, I won't be able to keep any of these other shifters alive.

The wolf with red fur stalks forward, but his pack members hang back. As he draws closer, I realize he's nearly as big as Kian, who's quite possibly the largest wolf shifter I've ever seen.

He's still not as big as my men's shadow wolf forms though. If things go south in a hurry, I can only hope Kian and Malix can take on the entire group themselves. Of course, if things go *that* far south, we'll be on our asses and without a plan for the third damn time.

The wolf leader stalks past me, sniffing the air. He could be testing my scent for any number of things—if I smell like Quinton, if he can sense a betrayal. Mostly, he's probably trying to intimidate me and get me to show my hand.

Lucky for him, my hands are free and clear.

I shoot a warning look at Kian and Malix, urging them with my eyes to stay put.

Kian looks like he's chafing at letting me take charge, but I know it's not because he doesn't think I can handle it. It's more that he's worried about what might happen if the Silver Crest pack attacks me while I'm trying to look unthreatening.

I let the red-furred wolf do his macho circle around me and Frost, while keeping my elbow locked tight around Frost's arm. Frost inches closer to me during the wolf's rotation, until his nose is almost buried in my hair. He breathes deeply, inhaling me to calm the fury raging inside him. I can almost sense the shadows shifting and humming beneath his skin. His dark markings pick up speed, but after a few seconds, they slow again.

Getting closer to me, *smelling* me, works. I really do ground him.

The red wolf finally circles back around to where he started, then stands facing us, his muzzle lifted.

Magic shimmers over his body, and a split second later, I'm facing a burly, freckled man with fiery red hair and a matching beard. Sunlight glints off the ginger hairs coating his barrel chest. His hair is shaved on the sides but long on top and braided back in a Viking style.

To be totally honest, he's almost more intimidating in human form. He looks like the kind of lumberjack that lives in the forest and carries an ax around just for funsies.

Then Malix breaks the silence with a flippant, "Hey, Cormac. Long time no see, bro."

I fight the urge to groan. All three men were specifically told to stay quiet and let me handle the talking. Of all of them, I didn't expect Malix to be the one who forgot the rules.

So my men know this guy. I suppose it makes sense, given that Felicity's pack split off from Quinton's. I'm sure they've picked up other members since then, but the original pack members are probably all people the feral shifters know.

Cormac ignores Malix, his green gaze meeting mine.

"What's wrong with him?" he asks, jerking his chin toward Frost.

I blink. I didn't expect *that* to be the first question out of this guy's mouth. "That's a long story."

"He stupid?"

Fury flares inside my chest, but I carefully tamp it down before it can become an inferno. "No," I say flatly. "He's injured, and being close to me helps him deal with the injury."

"You come here because he's injured?"

"No," I repeat, trying not to let my agitation show. Cormac's caveman-like, monosyllabic questions are annoying as fuck. "We're here to request a parlay with Felicity."

"Parlay?" A grin splits his beard, his white teeth glinting. He turns his head slightly over his shoulders, and a silver stud glints in his nose in the sunshine. "She must think we're pirates."

The group of wolves at his back snuffle and paw at the ground in amusement.

Okay, this guy's already getting on my damn nerves.

Unfortunately, dealing with arrogant alpha males is a fact of life,

something I've had way more experience with than I ever wanted. So I summon all my patience before I say, "We came to speak with Felicity. We just want to offer a temporary truce and have a discussion with your alpha and her advisors. We're here to help."

Cormac laughs. "We don't need help."

Kian shifts restlessly on his feet. It's a small movement, but the pack reacts with startling quickness, responding to the inherent threat in his posture. Five wolves leap forward, forming a barrier between the ginger-haired man and us. Their jaws drop open, teeth bared as loud snarls cut through the air. Cormac's previously unbothered expression hardens to steel, although he doesn't make a move to shift.

"Kian!" I hiss, glaring at the tall man beside me. He can't hear the thoughts in my head since we're in human form, but my unspoken subtext is quite clear. *If you ruin this, I'll ruin you.*

His jaw tightens as he glances at me for the briefest instant, another silent communication that I think probably promises a massacre if this guy doesn't stop grandstanding. But Kian holds up both his hands anyway and stands down.

Malix just looks amused. Damn him. I wish I could feel that way right now. I wish I had the ability to let shit roll off me the way he does, maintaining a cool, unbothered composure in even the most stressful situations.

But that's definitely not me, and it probably never will be.

Cormac glares at me, speaking up over the low snarls of the wolves. "You have the audacity to come onto our land with these... monsters," he snaps the word, baring his teeth at Kian, "and demand an audience with our Alpha?"

I was starting to think he wasn't capable of speaking in full sentences, so the formality in his tone gives me pause. The guy's overbearing "bro" attitude is just an act, I realize. Meant to keep others from realizing he's in charge.

Realizing he's a threat.

"They aren't monsters," I reply, careful to keep my voice even despite the anger his slur dredges up in me.

"Yeah, well, they're also not welcome here," Cormac shoots back.

Shit. I've got to get this conversation back under control.

Frost's tenuous hold on his emotions is wavering beside me. I can feel it. His fingers are wrapped around my bicep like vises, bruising and immovable.

"Look, I know you have no reason to believe me," I say. "But we're no longer in communication with Quinton. We're not allied with him."

Cormac raises a thick eyebrow. "I'm supposed to believe you?"

"You don't have to," I say with a shrug, "but I'm asking you to give us the benefit of the doubt. Give us a half hour to talk to your alpha. If she wants us to leave after that, we will."

The burly man stares down his nose at me for several moments. I think he's going to deny us and send us packing just for shits and giggles, and a small pit yawns open in my stomach. What the hell are we supposed to do next if the Silver Crest pack refuses to even grant us a conversation?

But then Cormac glances over his shoulder again and singles out one of the wolves standing at attention behind him. "Rodrigo, go get our alpha."

The thin black wolf nods once, does an about-face, and takes off.

Cormac turns back to me. "No funny business."

"Of course not," I say calmly, keeping my posture as relaxed as possible. "That's not what we're here for."

His eyes narrow a little, and he cocks his head to one side. "How the hell did you get mixed up with these three, anyway? You seem like a nice enough girl. What are you doing running around with them?"

As he speaks, his gaze drifts over my body. It's more assessing than leering, but it doesn't matter.

Frost's reaction is immediate.

His entire body stiffens, the thin thread of control I felt him clinging to earlier seeming to vanish in an instant. A low growl rumbles through his chest, and he starts to step away from me, moving toward Cormac.

Kian and Malix are in motion almost before I even register the danger. Leaving their hands where the wolves can see them, they step forward to put themselves between the Silver Crest pack and me and Frost.

Following their lead, I turn toward the blond man and throw my arms around his neck, clinging to him even as he continues to growl and try to pull away.

"No, Frost. Please. It's okay, just stay with me," I murmur directly in his ear. "He's not a threat. None of these wolves are. They're not worth it."

My heart beats wildly, nearly choking me, but I ignore it. I can't let him lose his tenuous hold on sanity.

I can't lose him again.

He tries to jerk away, but I don't let him. At least in human form, he's not

three times bigger than me, so I have a fighting chance of keeping him close if I cling to him with everything I have.

If he shifts, though...

God, please, no.

“What’s going on?” Cormac barks.

I hear Malix tell him something in a low voice, but I block out their conversation and draw back just enough to press my forehead to Frost’s. His soft, pale blond hair tickles my face, forming a curtain between us and the landscape around us.

“Hey,” I say softly, pressing my body against his. It’s an incredibly intimate embrace, not just because we’re hugging, but because we’re naked. Fortunately, I think it’s that very thing that allows me to drag his attention away from Cormac. So much of our skin is pressed together that I can feel him everywhere, and I know he can feel me too. “Everything’s okay. Stay with me.”

Frost’s icy blue eyes latch on to mine, and a shudder wracks his body. “I... can’t.”

I pull my hands up to his face and anchor him against me, gently brushing my thumbs over his cheeks. “Yes you can. Just breathe.”

His eyes are stormy and barely focused. His shadows are waving madly now, flickering over his skin in anger. I see the movement out of the corner of my eyes but try not to focus on it. I try not to think about how close he is to losing it.

Because if I can’t get a handle on his emotions, Felicity definitely isn’t going to ally with us. Not after he slaughters her people.

“Close your eyes,” I murmur. “Listen to my voice. Breathe me in. Focus on me.”

Frost nods, breathing hard. His hands shoot up to my shoulders, and he clutches me like I’m the only life raft on a stormy sea. Slowly, he gets control of his breaths. I speak to him under my voice, guiding him back, promising him that no other man will ever touch me except him and his brothers.

All the words I’m saying are meant to calm Frost, but I realize as I speak that I truly do mean it. I can’t imagine another man touching me. I can’t imagine ever *wanting* that. Even if the four of us can never fully repair the bond that was shattered, there will never be anyone else for me.

Just them. Only them.

I tell Frost that too, and eventually, my whispered reassurances seem to

work, at least a little. His shadows grow somewhat calm again. They're still moving faster than I would like, but at least it's progress.

Finally, his palm drifts up to my face, and he sags against me like he's just finished the biggest battle of his life. And maybe he has. I don't know what's going on inside him. None of us know. I manage to catch him just in time, so he doesn't slump right down to the rocky ground.

His dead weight, however, is just a bit too heavy for me. I manage to hold him against my body as I go down to my knees, the impact reverberating through my joints and into my damn teeth.

It's at this very inopportune moment that a dry female voice speaks up from behind me.

"Well, well, well. It looks like my husband isn't taking very good care of his pets, now is he?"

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AMORA

CRANING my neck to glance over my shoulder, I look up at the new arrival.

Felicity... isn't what I expected. She's of average height, stocky, and with arms more toned than Frost's beneath her wide-sleeved tank top. Her wavy blonde hair spills around her tanned shoulders in the quintessential surfer girl look, tousled and bleached from the sun.

She arches one brow and stares down at me with eyes so dark brown they're almost black. Her round face, high cheekbones, and soft features make her look younger than I know she must be, but her eyes seem old. Like she's seen more than most people do in their entire lifetimes.

"Who are you?" she asks, shifting her gaze from Frost to me.

I readjust my hold on him and stammer, "Um, Amora."

Her appearance has thrown me a little. I don't know what I was expecting, but it wasn't this.

Quinton is showy, larger than life in the worst kind of way, while Felicity's demeanor carries a different kind of weight. More regal, less violent. Even though she's the alpha of a pack just like her ex is, she wears her power so much differently. It's hard to believe the two of them were ever mated, honestly.

Of course I, of all shifters, know that a girl doesn't get to pick the mate the universe has in store for her. Or *three* mates, as it turned out.

Seeming satisfied with my one-word answer, or maybe just not all that interested in me, Felicity slides her gaze back to Frost. He's still slumped against me, not quite unconscious, but lost in a fog from his battle with the shadows. He hangs half on, half off my body, his arms resting on the dirt. Her dark eyes narrow as she takes him in, and then she glances past me to Kian

and Malix.

“You’re not welcome here,” Felicity tells them. Although her voice is deep and smooth, seemingly unbothered, there’s a hint of vitriol beneath her words.

Quinton obviously did a number on this woman. I can only imagine that the sight of their shadow tattoos brings up a lot of bad memories for her.

Before I can try to take control of the situation, Kian speaks up.

“We know, Alpha Felicity,” he says in a calm, respectful tone. “If we had anywhere else to turn, we wouldn’t have come here.”

Shock renders me momentarily mute. Where’s his usual growly stubbornness? Since when does he show deference to anyone but Quinton?

Since he’s not Quinton’s little lapdog anymore, I remind myself.

And he seems to have read the situation correctly. Maybe it’s the fact that he called her alpha without prompting, or maybe it’s his admission that he’s aware they’re not wanted here, but the hard glint in Felicity’s dark eyes fades a little.

She meets the questioning gaze Cormac shoots her from where he stands off to one side and nods. “Stand down.”

Her wolves immediately back up, giving the rest of us room, although they don’t go too far. Cormac remains where he is, within striking distance of my mates.

Felicity inclines her head toward Frost. “What happened to him?”

Instantly, my hackles go up. I lean over his body, tighten my grip on Frost’s shoulders, and glance around at the watching wolves. Cormac looms like an immovable mountain behind Malix, his eyes narrowed on us as if waiting impatiently for someone to make a wrong move.

If Felicity’s pack gets even the faintest whiff that Frost is a danger to their alpha, they’ll attack. And either he’ll kill them in that fight, or he’ll be too weakened and out of it from his struggle against his shadows and die at their hands.

I can’t let either of those possibilities come to pass.

Felicity is still waiting for an answer to her question. I know we need to tell her something, but somehow, I don’t think the “it’s a long story” line I gave Cormac is going to fly with this woman. And considering that Frost is literally half unconscious in my arms, I can’t exactly play it off. *Haha, one too many beers last night! You know how it goes.*

Felicity doesn’t strike me as someone who’s easily fooled. She’s already

noticed that something is pretty damn wrong with him, so it's not like I have an opening to hide it or deny it.

So should I tell her the truth? Fudge the details so he doesn't sound like a raging killing machine?

At the end of the day, it *was* her ex who did this to Frost. That alone might be all the proof she needs that we're here with the intention of joining her. She's a woman who walked away from her mate for moral reasons; surely that means she's a woman who understands that a mate is sometimes the reason to walk away from an immoral alpha.

I manage to get my legs rearranged under Frost's weight so I can plop down on the rough ground. It's not exactly luxury suede beneath my bare ass, but it's better than trying to remain in a semi-indecent crouching position with Frost melting off me like the subject of a Salvador Dali painting.

When I'm flat on the ground with my knees crooked beneath Frost's body, I meet Felicity's gaze as I say, "Quinton happened to him."

Her expression doesn't change, although her eyes narrow a fraction. "Elaborate."

I don't feel like it's my story to tell. Not really. Plus, I'm not certain what Felicity does or doesn't know, particularly in regards to the three feral shifters. I came into the picture well after she took off and forged her own pack, and until this moment, I only knew her in the abstract. So I look over at Kian for help.

"Quinton forced more shadows into him," he says without preamble.

I can't be certain in the bright sunlight, but I think Felicity's face pales just a little. "More on top of what he was born with?"

Kian nods. "Much more. He called it an 'experiment.' I think he thought it would kill Frost, and it nearly did."

The two of them stare at one another in some kind of wordless communication. A shared understanding, I think, about how dangerous Quinton really is.

Malix breaks the silence and adds, "After it happened, Frost was kind of, you know, out of it. We thought he was too far gone, but..." He trails off and flashes his million watt smile at me. "Amora here is like some kind of lucky charm."

Felicity's shrewd dark gaze slides to me. "Oh?"

Something about her appraisal makes me uncomfortable. I don't want to get into an explanation of our odd, three-way, possibly broken bond or what

any of it means, so I just shrug and tighten my fingers on Frost's skin. "I'm his mate. My presence helps him keep the shadows under control somehow."

Malix hooks a thumb at Cormac and says, "It was working just fine, until your right-hand man here started eyeing up our girl and set off his inner beast."

"Mal," I say warningly. The last thing we need is him flippantly telling the entire pack what a threat Frost is. "He's *fine*. He had a moment, but he's fine now. It takes a lot out of him to fight off the shadows."

I cut a glare across the pack, then shift my focus to Felicity, daring her with my eyes to say something she'll regret. My entire body vibrates with tension as I wait to see if anyone is going to move. To attack us, or to attack Frost because he has too much shadow in him.

In the midst of our silent standoff, Frost opens his eyes. His pupils contract and focus on me with a kind of gentle concern, then he carefully sits up, moving slowly so as not to alarm anyone. He surveys our surroundings—the rocky terrain, the pack, and Felicity, whom he clearly recognizes.

His hand rests on my knee as he asks, "Everything all right?"

But Kian is the one who answers. "I don't know," he says deliberately, speaking to Felicity. "Is everything all right, alpha?"

Malix and Frost exchange loaded glances.

Jesus, what will happen if this turns into a fight? Is Frost even capable of fighting without turning into a shadow monster?

Seconds tick past, and nobody moves, but it's obvious we're ready to spring into action if we have to. Kian, Malix, myself—a ripple of understanding passes between the three of us like a wordless promise. If it comes down to it, we'll defend Frost, even if the fact that we're heavily outnumbered would mean certain death.

But then Felicity sighs. "Yes. Everything is all right. Nobody is in danger here yet."

It's as good an assurance as any. And probably the only one we're going to get.

Most of the tension from the shifters around us eases up. I help Frost to his feet, and we join Kian and Malix, facing Felicity and the rest of her pack.

The alpha asks, "You came here because you thought I might be able to help you with his situation?"

I shake my head. "No. I mean, not entirely. We're here because Quinton has crossed one too many lines. If there's anybody who can help us fight him,

we figured it would be you.”

Felicity throws her head back and laughs, but there’s hardly any amusement to the sound. “I’ve been fighting him for years. What makes you think I can help you?”

“It’s more a matter of whether we could help each other,” I point out. “Maybe separately, you can’t beat him, and separately, we can’t beat him. But together, we might be stronger.”

She makes a noise in her throat, pursing her lips for several seconds before she looks at Kian. “I remember a time when if Quinton told you to leap off a cliff because you might find the shadow realm at the bottom, you wouldn’t have paused to question his order. What changed?”

He doesn’t even hesitate as he answers. “Amora.”

I blink at him, surprised by how quickly he popped off with my name.

Felicity’s brows shoot up toward her hairline. “What, now?”

Kian angles his head toward me, although his expression remains cool and unemotional. “She changed things.”

Since it would take him forever to tell the full story with his short, clipped sentences, Malix takes over and gives a brief account of what happened back at Quinton’s pack lands. He steers clear of any mention of why I showed up there in the first place—smart, since revealing I once wanted to kill all three of them in the beginning probably isn’t the best way to forge alliances. But he touches on my imprisonment, the escape where they chose me—their mate—over their alpha, and then the showdown where Quinton and his shadows chased us and tried to kill us, and in the process, nearly killed Frost.

At the end of his tale, Felicity stares quietly at us. Despite her youthful appearance, she has a commanding, powerful aura. It’s hard to guess what she’s thinking, which makes her almost more frightening than Quinton, in a way. Quinton is a snake, reactionary but easier to read because of the way he projects his fury.

Felicity, on the other hand, is an enigma. I hope she’ll be an ally, but at this point, she could just as easily decide to be our enemy instead.

Just when I think I won’t be able to bear the loaded silence for a moment longer, she finally glances at Frost and says, “Let’s get you to the village. I might be able to help your situation, at the very least.”

“What about Quinton?” I ask.

“We’ll see how it goes.”

With that cryptic response, she takes the lead for the last leg of our walk

through her pack's lands.

As Felicity's wolves close in around us, I exchange glances with my mates. It's not an answer, but it's a start, at least.

Hopefully, our decision to come here won't end up biting us in the ass.

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AMORA

FELICITY REMAINS in human form as she leads us through the blistering sunlight. I don't blame her—I don't like ruining my clothes if I don't have to, either. Her wolves, however, remain on four legs and surround us... a little too closely. They pin us in, giving us no chance to run even if we had the inclination to do so.

But where would we run to? The landscape is beautiful here, rocky and slightly wooded, but we don't know the terrain like they do. We'd have a hard time escaping and covering our tracks, especially with an entire pack breathing down our necks.

I walk hand in hand with Frost, while Malix brushes up against my other side. I'm still wary, still worrying over Frost's safety, which, surrounded by a bunch of unfamiliar wolves, feels as tenuous as his link to sanity.

As if he can sense my thoughts, Malix brushes against me again and meets my gaze. He gives me a little half-smile that goes a long way toward easing my mind. On his other side, even Kian doesn't appear to be overly worried—although it's hard for me to get a handle on his actual emotions in this moment, since his expression is so stony.

Even though Felicity left our possible truce open-ended for now, none of my three men seem to be brooding on the situation. They've all known her for a long time, so it stands to reason that they can read her moods better than I can. That train of thought makes a new question pop into my head.

If Quinton was once almost like a surrogate father to the three of them, was his mate like a mother to them?

It never really occurred to me that coming here and seeing her might dredge up memories for them. All three of the guys lost their biological

mothers to the damage Quinton did to them in his quest to create shadow shifters. When Felicity left, they lost her, too.

Although, as with most toxic relationships, Quinton probably did a great job of turning them against her.

“Hey, alpha,” Malix says, doing that thing where he breaks the silence because he can’t stand being quiet. “You still watch soap operas?”

Felicity’s chuckle carries back to us over her wolves. “Do you still piss sitting down?”

Kian chokes on a laugh that he tries to hide behind one hand, and even Frost cracks a smile. It’s such a beautiful sight that I almost stop in my tracks just to stare at it.

Thank god for Malix’s ridiculous need for humor and conversation.

“Low blow, alpha,” Malix says in a mock wounded voice. “I was eight then. Shit. You don’t know me.”

As he and Felicity continue to banter back and forth, relief fills me. We’re safe. For now, anyway. Frost has proven he’s not a danger, even though all three of us were ready to defend him to the death.

I tighten my fingers around Frost’s, thinking of that moment when Kian’s unspoken challenge hung in the air, while we waited for Felicity to decide on her next course of action. It could have gone another way—a very bloody way—and the four of us were braced for such an outcome.

We were firmly a *team* in that moment, I realize.

I was on their side one hundred percent, and I knew without a doubt they were on mine. At some point during our time together, I’ve become one of them. Honorary shadow shifter, fully a part of their little pack. The men who were once my sworn enemies are now men I’d die to protect.

Fucking hell. That’s a rabbit hole I could fall down.

I could spend hours getting lost in thoughts of what that means and trying to untangle how I feel about it. We had a bond, then it broke. I *felt* it break. But now it’s as if that bond has returned, or has been replaced by something else entirely.

And I don’t know what that means. I keep almost calling the men my mates—I *did* call Frost that, for lack of a better word when explaining things to Felicity. But are they? What are we to each other, besides inextricably wrapped up in each other’s lives? In each other’s hearts and minds.

Right now isn’t a great time for an existential crisis. Even with Malix cracking jokes with Felicity and Kian walking confidently by his side, we

aren't out of the woods yet. So I push all of my emotional turmoil and uncertainty aside before I can get too lost in my own head.

If Felicity is lying to us or planning to trick us, I want to be ready to fight back.

Don't let your guard down, I remind myself. Don't get too comfortable.

After about ten minutes on foot, we circle around a large, hilly rock formation and enter the Silver Crest pack village. The formations form a horseshoe shape around the small village, casting shadows and giving the pack a little more protection from the wind and sun than they would have otherwise had.

The place is quaint, a mish-mash of houses that remind me so much of my own pack back home in Montana that a niggling pang takes up root in my chest. They're unassuming, a bit rustic and run-down, but well built. Corrugated metal roofs glint atop small cabins, while little sidewalks lead away from the dirt road to colorfully painted front doors. A few kids play in the yards, and adults pause on their porches to watch curiously as our group passes by.

Surprisingly, nobody looks too concerned to see four strangers marching through their town with the alpha.

Felicity leads us through, greeting members of her pack as she walks. She takes us down a main road until we leave behind the side-by-side homes, and then we cut right toward a long, low building built up against the edge of the rock formation. Narrow windows are cut into the facing wall, all of them open to the weather.

We step inside the building one by one, and I blink a few times as my eyes adjust. Several women sit at a long table just inside the space, bent over large bowls as they break green beans and shell peas. They spare us a glance but then return to their low conversation, ignoring us as we head for a door in the back next to a dark, quiet kitchen counter.

Most of Felicity's wolves shift back to human form and remain behind in the cafeteria area, a couple of them peeling off into the kitchen toward a trio of industrial fridges. Cormac and two of the larger shifters follow us through the door into a modest office. Felicity's three men take up positions around the room's perimeter, while the three feral shifters and I crowd in front of her small desk.

She perches on the edge of her chair, and it squeaks beneath her as she leans down to open a drawer out of sight. As she silently shuffles around

inside, I keep hold of Frost's hand and meet Malix's eyes with a raised brow.

I'm... uncomfortable here, in Felicity's personal space. Probably because this is clearly her private office where she spends her time and does her work, so being here makes me feel like an invader, somehow. I don't know how to stand, where to put my hands so I don't look threatening, or how to remain loose and relaxed to show her I'm not a threat. My impulse is to remain on alert in case shit slides sideways, but that could be misconstrued as aggressive.

I don't want to fuck this up. Not just because she's capable of helping us against Quinton, but because she might be able to help Frost.

I'm the only one of my companions who's overtly bothered by the situation. Kian, Malix, and even Frost all seem relaxed, watching Felicity with interest as she digs around in her desk. Only the top of her head is visible, a shock of streaked blonde hair peeking over the top of the desk. I can hear the telltale jangling of keys and locks tumbling, as if she's opening several different lockboxes, one after another.

Finally, she emerges with a small black vessel that appears to be cut from some kind of natural ebony stone. She sets it on the surface of the desk and tosses a key ring aside before she settles back against her chair.

"Recognize it?" she asks Kian.

He nods once. "Yes, alpha."

I wait for him to explain, but in true Kian fashion, he doesn't.

Malix leans over and murmurs under his breath, "That's the box that used to hold Quinton's shadow realm stone."

"Oh," I say, zeroing in on the unobtrusive object. It doesn't feel all that magical, but I know, logically, that this must be how Felicity has access to the shadow magic she's used against us in the past. If my men sense any kind of shadow realm magic creeping from the crudely cut box, they keep the knowledge to themselves.

Felicity taps the top of the stone vessel, her expression thoughtful. "Power seeped from the stone into its container over the many years it was encased in this box. But the magic in the box is fading. It fades further every time I use it." She drops her hand into her lap and laughs bitterly, then catches my gaze. "I wanted to take the stone too. When I stole the box, I thought the stone would be inside. My ex-mate, though... he's too smart. He knew before I did that I would be leaving him, and he took precautions to protect his precious stone." Squaring her shoulders, Felicity rises to her feet

and grabs the box. “Come with me. I can’t guarantee results, but we’ll see what we can do.”

Back out in the cafeteria, Felicity has Frost lie lengthwise along one of the many dining tables that line the room. The ladies in the corner continue their bean shucking, while the remaining shifters—now in human form and consuming a variety of beverages and snacks—perch on the tables around us to watch. We’re all still naked in the aftermath of our shift to human form, but no one bats an eye. Like most shifter communities, they just don’t care much about stuff like that.

I slide onto the bench next to Frost and hold his hand tightly. “You okay?”

He nods, his gaze locked on the low-hanging ceiling where a fan drifts in lazy circles. “I’m fine.”

“You’re lying,” I tease him gently, lifting his hand and resting it against my chest, right above my heart.

“Never,” he replies, an echoing note of affection in his tone.

Felicity climbs onto the table beside him, kneeling on one knee next to his trim waist. Her gaze runs over his body where his shadow tattoos are shivering and waving, picking up the pace.

I can feel his anxiety through our bond. Feel the worried hum of his body through his fingers.

“Frost,” I murmur, “look at me.”

His head tilts on the tabletop until our eyes meet. Pale strands of his hair rest over the angles of his cheek bones, and I reach out with my free hand to brush them away. I let my fingers linger on his skin as I say, “Remember to breathe.”

Felicity opens the box and positions it in the palm of her left hand, which she then holds out over Frost’s torso. “Ready?”

“Yes, alpha,” Frost says firmly, turning his gaze back to the ceiling before he closes his eyes.

She leans over him and presses her free hand to his torso right above the mottled bruises he still has from Kian’s resuscitation efforts.

Suddenly, black shadows begin to swirl around the box in her hand.

I watch, a mixture of horror and awe twisting my stomach. The shadows dart out of the box and around her hand, then twist up her arm like snakes. Her eyes close and her head falls back until her face points to the ceiling, while her fingers dig into Frost’s skin.

I eye her hand. I don't like the rough way she's handling him. But Frost remains still and silent, so I hold back my need to protect him.

"Dear god," Felicity breathes, her breaths coming faster. She holds her position, her eyes squeezed shut like she's in pain. Like she's experiencing firsthand what's happening inside him. "Quinton just forced the shadows into you. *Violently*. As if you were nothing more than useless meat..." She trails off, and her fingers move higher over Frost's chest. Grimacing, she adds, "They're everywhere. Your body is a wasteland. The front lines of a war you can't fight alone."

Felicity's words are almost lyrical, and they seem to come from deep inside her without much prompting. I can't help but wonder what she's feeling on her end with those shadows crawling up her forearm and shoulder.

Her eyes open, and she looks down at Frost with an almost motherly protectiveness. "How dare he do this to you?"

Frost doesn't open his eyes to acknowledge her, but I can tell it's because he can't. Whatever the shadow magic is doing that's allowing Felicity to sense the problems inside him, it's causing him pain. I tighten my grip on his hand to root him to the moment and remind him that I'm here.

Felicity shakes her head, still staring down at Frost's twisted, pained expression. "If this is how he's creating feral shifters now, it will end badly. Very, very badly," she says, almost to herself. "They'll be unhinged. Violent. Deranged. Unstoppable."

Her words pierce through my worries over Frost, but quite frankly, I'm not in a position to care about an army of unhinged shadow shifters forced into service by her ex when I just want my mate to be safe.

"Can you fix him?" I ask her.

Her long golden hair slips around her face as she stares down at Frost's torso. "Perhaps. I don't think I can pull the excess out of him, but I think I can... rearrange."

Kian speaks up, his voice gruff. "Rearrange how?"

Felicity's grip on the shadow box loosens ever so slightly, though the shadows continue to twine around her bare arm. She presses on Frost's abdomen like a doctor searching for something swollen or out of place, and her gaze goes unfocused.

"The new shadows are fighting for dominance with Frost's natural shadows—the ones he was born with. It's not so much that he's overwhelmed by the number, but that the newly and violently arrived shadows are

determined to destroy the old rather than integrate into his natural magical system.”

She falls silent, still staring at the far wall. Her fingers continue to probe Frost’s skin, and every few seconds, she lifts her palm and makes a motion like she’s pushing something out of the way. As she works, the shadows that have clawed up her arm and shoulders begin to seep down her other arm and toward Frost. They mimic her movements above his body, never touching him but clearly performing some kind of assistance to whatever she’s doing.

Beneath my hand, Frost’s fingers twitch. I look away from Felicity to his face, where the skin at the corners of his eyes is tight and his eyes move abruptly beneath his eyelids. Every part of his body is taut—his head tilted back ever so slightly, elongating his neck and showing the corded muscles beneath his skin.

I hate seeing him in pain. Since the night Quinton overloaded him with shadows, he’s been in an even more severe, constant state of pain, and my heart can’t handle seeing him like this.

Please let this work. Please let it be worth it.

Felicity’s shadows begin to wrap around Frost’s torso like a lasso. They don’t sink into his skin, luckily, or I might have something to say about yet more shadows touching him. But they form a barrier around his chest and stomach, then begin to slowly rotate around him.

In return, Frost’s shadow tattoos slow dramatically. They sync up with Felicity’s circling minions in a soft dance.

Felicity sits back and stretches out her legs over the edge of the table, then rests her hands in her lap. She watches the shadows moving and doesn’t speak.

Silence stretches over the room, broken only by the low murmur of conversation from the cooks in the corner. I watch Frost’s face closely, waiting for any sign that *something* is happening. His fingers wrapped in mine have gone still, though his eyes are still swiveling wildly beneath his pale eyelids.

Then his entire body relaxes all at once. A soft breath expels from his lungs, and all the tension in his face vanishes in an instant.

Felicity smiles triumphantly and opens her little box. Her shadows peel away from Frost and spiral back toward the container, where they vanish into the interior without a trace. She flicks the lid back over onto the box, then turns a little latch, sealing it closed.

“Done,” she says.

I lean over Frost and put my free hand against his cheek.

His long lashes flutter, and he opens his eyes. Despite the fact that the whites of his eyes are bloodshot, probably from the battle he’s been fighting, his irises are the purest blue I think I’ve ever seen.

“How do you feel?” I ask.

He blinks, then rotates his head on the table to face me. His other hand reaches up to cup mine where I’m still holding his face, and he lets out another little sigh. “Better. Much better.”

The sheer avalanche of relief that barrels through me cannot just be my own. A part of me recognizes that it’s a collective feeling of relief tinged with Malix’s and Kian’s own emotions.

Felicity slides gracefully off the top of the table and stands. “That should help stabilize him. The new shadows are still there, but have found a place in the hierarchy. I would venture to say that within a few hours, he’ll feel back to normal. *His* normal, of course.”

I meet Frost’s gaze. “I’m going to let go of you for a second, okay? I want to test if you can handle this on your own.”

He nods. “All right.”

I gently extract my fingers from his, then slide my other hand away from his face. Pausing, I give him a minute to adjust to the absence of my touch, and when he doesn’t react, I slowly step away from the bench. I back a couple of feet away, still staring at him, ready to leap back toward him if necessary.

But his eyes remain clear, his expression cool and enigmatic as always. He sits up and stretches, then looks down at his arms where his tattoos are moving and shifting at their normal rate. Faster than his brothers, but not the frantic madness they whipped around with after Quinton’s assault.

It worked.

Thank fuck.

Felicity shifts her focus toward an old clock set up on one wall, then back to us.

“We’ll set you up in a guest cabin,” she says. “Dinner is a community affair here, so when the food is ready, I’ll send someone over with meals for you.”

I exchange glances with Malix, and from the look on his face, I’m certain that he picked up on the subtext of her words just like I did. She doesn’t want

us eating with her pack.

Despite the amazing thing she just did for Frost, she still doesn't trust us.

Hell, I guess I shouldn't judge her for that. I'm not exactly handing out trust like candy these days myself.

Felicity's gaze flicks over the four of us again. "Rest. Recover. First thing tomorrow morning, we'll meet to discuss Quinton."

Kian nods once. "Thank you, Alpha Felicity. For everything."

"Don't thank me yet," she warns. Then she turns her back on us and disappears into her office, closing the door behind her.

Right. We still don't know if she'll actually be willing to help us against Quinton.

Cormac rises from a nearby table, heaving his muscled bulk up from the seat and striding over to us before jerking his chin. "Come on."

I offer Frost a hand and help him off the table, although I let go of him so he can walk on his own. I don't want to coddle him unless he wants me to. Then the four of us fall into step behind Cormac, while several of Felicity's other wolves close in around us in a mirror of the way they escorted us into the village.

Sunset isn't far off, and the sky is turning gorgeous shades of amber and orange near the horizon. We don't have to walk far before we turn up a little pathway to a small cabin with open windows and a sky blue door.

Cormac twists the knob and shoves the door open. "There are clothes in the closet. Water in the pantry. Make yourselves at home."

"Thank you," I say, then brush past him into the cool, dim interior.

Kian exchanges a few words with the red-haired shifter while the rest of us check out our new temporary digs. The cabin only has one main room, with a small kitchenette set in one corner and a living area on the opposite side of the space, and a bedroom in the back. Two doors are set in the back wall—presumably the closet and a bathroom. Everything is beige except for a few colorful accents in the wall hangings and rugs scattered around the place.

The front door closes, and I swivel on my heel to see Kian peeking out through the curtains on the window near the couch.

"Everything okay?" Malix asks.

Kian shrugs. "Maybe. They're not leaving."

The three of us cross to his side and join him in watching out the window. Cormac and his men have settled into positions around the cabin and shifted to their wolf forms.

My brows draw together as I realize why none of the shifters have left yet. “They’re watching the cabin. They’re watching *us*.”

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MALIX

I LEAN over to look past Amora, peering out the window. Cormac is the only one who's kept his human form. He's across the street, standing on the porch of the cabin facing ours. I'm not sure if that cabin is occupied or empty, but either way, the big man doesn't look like he's got any intentions of leaving it anytime soon.

My nose wrinkles. "What the hell? Do they think we're going to run off?"

Amora scowls. "No. They just don't trust us. What do they think we're going to do? Wait until they're all asleep and burn down the village?"

Kian drops the curtain and ushers us away from the window with a jerk of his head. "Probably something like that, yeah."

We fan out into the living area. The place is small but serviceable, even if it's so beige I feel like someone turned off the color in my goddamn eyesight. I circle around a coffee table made of recycled pallets, and settle onto one end of the couch, thankful to finally be off my feet. Hopefully, we'll get to kick back for a couple days before the next crisis.

Frost pauses beside the couch and glances back toward the window, even though the curtain is closed and he can't see the pack members surrounding us anymore. For the first time since we left the cafeteria, he speaks.

"We come from Quinton's pack," he reminds us in his matter-of-fact way. "Can we blame them for being cautious?"

I grimace and put one foot up on the coffee table. "You ain't wrong, brother. But that's the problem, isn't it? They're watching us with that same fucking suspicion our own pack used to stare at us with."

Amora bypasses the living area, padding barefoot across the cabin as she comments, "To be fair, most of them *are* your old pack."

Kian grunts his agreement. “Then we should be used to it.”

As Amora digs into the closet at the back of the cabin, Kian steps into the kitchen and bangs cabinets open and closed as he pokes around.

It’s almost like being at home again.

Frost settles onto the other corner of the couch. “We’ve always been the unwanted,” he murmurs.

I drape an arm over the back of the couch and nod. “Just because we left Quinton’s dictatorship and are trying to throw in with Felicity’s pack doesn’t mean that’s ever going to change. We’re outsiders for life.”

Kian returns and tosses a water bottle my way. I catch it one-handed and twist off the lid, thankful for the hydration, even if it tastes like it’s been stored in lukewarm temperatures for two decades. Then he hands Frost his own bottle, leaves one on the table for Amora, and sinks onto the recliner set against the wall.

“We’ll play their game and toe the line,” he tells us with a shrug. “We know we aren’t here under false pretenses. We’re not spies for Quinton, and we’re no longer on his side. They’ll figure that out eventually.”

Amora returns from her perusal of the closet and drops an armful of clothes on the cushions between me and Frost. “Figure it out without killing us first, I hope.”

I snatch a black t-shirt off the top of the pile, then dig around for some pants. We haven’t worn clothes in days, so the fabric feels rough and unnatural on my skin. In my mind, my wolf howls his protestation against it. If he had his way, we’d be naked and wild twenty-four-seven.

Sorry buddy, I tell my wolf with a mental chuckle. The human side wins out on this one.

Not that I don’t like being naked, but sometimes it’s nice to go about my day without seeing dozens of dicks hanging out around me.

The t-shirt and shorts Amora picks are way too big on her, and the loose collar of the shirt opens wide around her collar bone, revealing one smooth, pale shoulder. She flops onto the cushions between me and Frost, and I lean over to kiss that bare skin.

She smiles at me, picks up her waiting water bottle, then asks, “Did your pack really not trust you?”

Kian sits in his armchair like it’s a goddamn throne. Legs wide, arms resting on either side, nose in the air. He’s so fucking extra.

He caps his water bottle and sets it on the arm as he answers. “I wouldn’t

say they don't trust us.”

“You wouldn’t?” I quip.

He purses his lips at me, but continues. “They don’t *like* us.”

Amora takes a quick swig of water, then presses the bottle to her lower lip as a sassy smile curves her lips. “Really? How could they ever not like you, Kian?”

I let out a guffaw, and Frost hides a grin behind his hand as he rubs at his jaw.

Kian’s gold-ringed brown eyes narrow. “I have no idea. I’m a ray of fucking sunshine.”

At that, all three of us lose it.

Kian polishes off his water bottle as he waits for us to get the laughter out of our system. He never once cracks a smile, but he also doesn’t seem pissed at being the object of our amusement. Maybe he knows how much we need a moment of levity.

When the last chuckle dies out, I shake my head, returning to the topic at hand. “We were Quinton’s special pets. He put us on a pedestal, treated us like we weren’t just different but *better*. A lot of people hated us for that.”

Amora looks a bit indignant. “You aren’t responsible for Quinton’s actions.”

“We aren’t,” I agree. “But when wolves get caught up in their jealous feelings, it’s hard to convince them otherwise, you know? So they resented us.”

Kian adds, “If they didn’t resent us, they feared us.”

“Either way, we never fit in,” I finish.

There’s a beat of silence, then Amora’s face twists with fury and she blurts out, “God, Quinton is *such* an asshole!”

“Whoa, calm down, kitty.” I chuckle. “We all know he’s an asshole. Look what he did to Frost.”

“But it’s not even just what he did to Frost,” she goes on, clearly ramping up for a rant. “He played with your lives and the lives of your mothers. He isolated you from *any* affection or family outside of each other. He brainwashed you to do his bidding. The level of torture and trauma he threw at you is horrific. He’s a shitty fucking person!”

By the end of her tirade, she’s a little out of breath, twin spots of color rising in her cheeks. Her emerald green eyes are wide, shining with unshed tears, and it hits me in a rush that her tears are for *us*. She cares about us

enough to feel pain on our behalf.

Holy shit. If I didn't already adore the woman, seeing her so passionate about our fucked up pasts would make me fall head over heels for her.

I think about mentioning it. Thanking her for caring so much or whatever. But after so much time in her presence, I know her too well for that. She's like Kian in that way—explosively passionate inside even though she doesn't like expressing it on the outside. If I draw attention to her soft side, it'll just make her clam up.

So instead, I slip an arm around her shoulders and press a kiss to her forehead as I say, "I can't argue with you about that. He is shitty."

Kian slouches deeper into his chair, and his fingers tighten on his water bottle with a crunch of plastic. "It took a long time to realize the truth, but there's no going back now."

Frost makes a quiet noise in his throat. "There was no going back the moment we chose Amora over him."

I ruffle her hair. "We're glad you woke us up, kitty. Hell, my feelings for Quinton were always complicated. He raised us, you know. We all had this ingrained instinct to please him and earn his respect."

Amora drapes one long leg over my thighs and leans back against Frost's chest, wriggling against the cushions as she makes a little nest for herself between us. "Not to mention he basically forced you to think that your *only purpose* was to find a weakness in the barrier between earth and the shadow realm and do his bidding."

"Got it in one," I agree. "But even with all that, there were times I resented him."

"*Hated* him," Frost adds.

I blink at my brother, then glance at Kian, who looks just as shocked by the admission as I am.

But I guess it makes sense.

Shit changed for all of us the night Quinton tried to kill our mate. Seeing her at the business end of that weapon made something snap inside me. In that moment, nothing mattered more than getting her out of there safely. I could see clearly for the first time that Quinton wasn't worth following anymore.

The truth is, though, he'd *never* been worth following, and I think on some level, all of us knew that.

That's why even though he was like a father to us, Frost could hate him

too.

Amora's toes dig into my side. "You zoned out. What are you thinking?"

Snapping back into the present, I grab her ankle in both my hands and start massaging the taut muscles in her calf. The angle of her leg gives me a nice view right up her pant leg to the apex of her thighs. I tug open the fabric more and leer inside. "Mm. Kitty's kitty."

"Oh, for fuck's sake." Amora groans, kicking me in the chest and dislodging my hand, even as she flushes a little and laughs.

We're interrupted by a knock at the door. Kian, Frost, and I all stand, our heads swiveling toward the door as we go on high alert.

Amora sighs. "Guys, they told us they were going to bring us food when it was ready."

She's right, of course, but that doesn't stop us from tag teaming the door. Frost and I loom behind Kian as he accepts the bag of food from an older woman who looks about as threatening as a wet paper bag. Cormac is still camped out on the porch across the street, and he watches us intently as Kian accepts the paper bag of food and thanks the old lady in his gruff way. Then we all back up inside, and I slam the door—after I blow Cormac a kiss, of course.

We return to the living area to split up the goods. The food is like my every daydream come true. Some kind of southwestern style meatloaf, potato casserole, green beans with hunks of ham, and freshly baked cornbread still steaming from the oven. I help myself to giant heaping portions of each, thankful the ladies in the cafeteria thought to ensure there was enough to feed ten large shifters, then dig in. The meatloaf explodes with juices and flavors, heavy with cayenne and rosemary, flecked with cheese and corn. Much better than the cheeseburgers I dreamed of on the way here.

Amora pops a piece of cornbread in her mouth, speaking around it. "We need to talk about Felicity and the best way to approach our conversation with her tomorrow."

Frost stabs a large green bean. "Honesty."

"Obviously," Amora agrees. "But she's still unsure about you guys. We have to show her you aren't the enemy."

I laugh and shove my fork under a pile of scalloped potatoes. "I don't know if that's even possible. Anything related to her ex is the enemy."

"But we *aren't* the enemy," Amora says firmly. "She has to see that. We have to figure out what's going to prove to her that we have good intentions."

Kian sighs. “Leave it to us. We know Felicity.”

“Yeah, but that’s the problem,” Amora shoots back. “She knows *you* too. And even though you no longer work for Quinton, I’m sure part of her still associates you with the man who broke her fucking heart. The man she hates more than anything.”

“True.” Kian inclines his head in acknowledgement. “But the fact that she helped Frost is a good sign. If she hated us as much as she hates Quinton, she would’ve let Frost’s shadows tear him apart and then danced on his grave.”

The conversation continues, Kian and Amora both leaning forward intently as they bat around different ideas for how to convince Felicity to keep helping us.

As the sound of their sometimes heated discussion fills the air, I watch Frost closely, looking for any indication that he’s not okay. But he seems more like himself than before, and the tightness in his expression has eased.

Maybe Felicity really did save him.

Maybe he’ll be all right.

Maybe... just fucking *maybe*, we all will.

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AMORA

THE BEAN SHUCKING ladies sure know how to cook a meal, and I devour every bit of it while hashing out plans for tackling our meeting with Felicity tomorrow.

But even as I listen to Malix and argue with Kian, Frost's silence worries me.

Once the meal is finished, I polish off my second bottle of water, watching him as he quietly cleans up the remnants of our meal. He spoke up a few times during our conversation, but there's definitely a kind of quiet exhaustion to him that I don't remember being there before. I don't know if it's just the result of the fact we traveled all the way here on foot while he battled the shadows, or if Felicity's little shadow voodoo did something to him.

Frost stacks his plate on top of mine, then does the same with Malix's plate and Kian's. "Anyone mind if I take first shower?" he asks.

Kian slumps in his armchair, legs spread and what's probably his fifth bottle of water perched on his knee. "Go for it."

Malix hops to his feet and takes the stack of dishes from Frost. "I'll take care of these. Go wash up."

Frost glides across the room in his usual unobtrusive way, then vanishes through the bathroom door. Malix carries the plates to the sink and turns on the water before bending down to dig for soap beneath the counter.

I glance at Kian to find that he's laid his head back on the cushions and closed his eyes.

The shower cranks on in the bathroom, and I can hear the soft sound of water drumming into the tub like a light rainfall.

Tossing aside my empty water bottle, I get up and follow Frost to the bathroom. Neither Kian nor Malix comment, or even react to me moving, and I don't offer up an explanation. I'm sure they've noticed the decline in his energy too, and I get the sense that they approve of me going to check on him.

Crazy. I never thought I could have entire conversations without saying a word.

I turn the rickety knob on the bathroom door, thankful that Frost didn't lock it.

Steam is already filling up the tiny room. A single bulb over the basin sink hardly gives off enough light to penetrate all four corners, and the toilet is tucked into such a small space between the sink and wall that there's no way a normal sized man could sit for a shit.

Stepping inside, I pull the door closed behind me.

The dark blue shower curtain rattles, and Frost's face appears around the edge. His pale hair is slicked back wetly, putting the sharp angles of his Nordic features on display. Water drips down his face and neck, and my gaze follows the glistening strands as far as it can—which isn't far, considering only his head and one shoulder are visible.

Too bad.

“What are you doing in here?” he asks, cocking his head inquisitively.

I lean against the sink, going for nonchalant even though I *know* he can sense my worry. “I just wanted to see how you’re feeling.”

He blinks those startling blue eyes at me. “I’m all right.”

“Are you really?” I press.

“I feel... strange,” he admits. “But better. I swear.”

Someone else might not have noticed the things he *isn’t* saying.

Someone who didn't have a special bond with him wouldn't hear the strained edge that he almost manages to conceal in his tone, but not quite.

All the things he's not saying are just as important as his assurances he's fine, because really, I think he's trying to convince himself more than he's trying to convince me. Frost keeps so much inside, internalizing every emotion, keeping his exterior as blank as stone and as cold as ice. And it makes sense that he does that. All three of these men do it in their own way, and it likely has everything to do with being raised by a damn psychopath.

But emotions don't cease to exist just because you can't articulate them.

I straighten and tug the giant t-shirt off over my head, then step out of the

soft cotton shorts that barely cling to my hips.

Frost doesn't move. His pupils dilate as his gaze rakes over my naked body, the dark pools expanding within the crystal blue of his irises. We've spent a lot of time naked around each other on our travels, and we all just sat naked in the cafeteria as Felicity worked her shadow magic on him.

But this is different.

Because this time, I'm naked with *intent*.

Something crackles in the air between us, and when I reach to open the curtain, he releases it and steps back to make room for me in the bathtub. The steam grows thicker as I climb over the rim of the tub to join him. I slide the curtain back into place, trapping all that good heat in our little bubble, then turn to face him.

He pulls me into his arms without a word. The water has warmed his skin, and the moment he envelops me, his heat chases away any cold I might have felt. He clings to me, holding me so tightly I couldn't move away even if I wanted to.

But I don't want to.

Clearly, his impulse to be close to me hasn't faded, and I don't mind it one bit. I latch my fingers behind his neck as the water beats down on my arms.

Neither of us moves for some time. His flesh is satiny smooth against mine, and the water trickling between us only heightens the sensation of skin against skin. I tangle my fingers in his hair and breathe in his intoxicatingly spicy scent, which is so at odds with his name.

Finally, I break the comfortable silence to ask, "How's the pain?"

Frost's hands open on my back, and he trails his palms up and down my spine with slow, measured movements. "More present now. Not overwhelming. Not like before," he assures me when my entire body tenses at the revelation. "A bit more intense than my 'normal' level of pain. Prior to Quinton's attack. But it's a pain I can live with."

My lips press together as I try to get ahold of the anger that rises up in me —a protective fury at the entire world on Frost's behalf. "You shouldn't have to live with it, though. You shouldn't have to get used to just carrying that pain around."

He makes a little noise in his throat that's almost a chuckle. "It's all right. I can live with a lot of things." He hesitates, then adds in a quiet voice, "There's only one thing I can't live without."

My eyes widen a little, and I blink droplets of water out of my eyelashes as I slide my chin over the soft skin of his shoulder. The warm spray of the shower splashes on my face, grounding me in this moment. I can even feel his heartbeat against mine, and I'm so thankful for that strong, sure sound.

"What is it?" I murmur. "What can't you live without?"

"You."

The honesty in his voice makes my breath catch.

I draw back—not enough to break our full body contact, but enough so that I can see his beautiful face. It's still neutral and mask-like, the way it is most of the time, but I've reached a point where I don't think that matters. I can read him despite that. I'm more attuned to his emotions than ever before, and I've come to recognize the micro-expressions he can't hide from someone who *truly* knows him.

I untangle my fingers from his hair and slide my hands back around his shoulders to cup his face. My heart flutters, and my words are barely a whisper.

"I'm not sure I could live without you either."

It's the truth. Maybe the strongest truth I've ever spoken aloud. I probably wouldn't have the guts to say it to anyone but Frost—not to Kian, and not even to Malix. But this man disarms me in a way no one else can.

He makes me feel desired. Needed. Safe.

No matter what I say to him, he never judges me or thinks less of me.

He just lets me... be.

Frost's blue eyes seem as deep and dark as an ocean in this shadowy little pocket of space behind the shower curtain. We stare at each other, each devouring the other with our gaze, as heat rises between us and around us. The connection between us surges, making every atom in my body burn with the need to be closer to him.

So I rise up onto my tiptoes and kiss him.

Frost makes a noise in his throat as my wet lips press against his. He tightens his arms around me, and I can feel the way his cock responds to our kiss, swelling and thickening between us.

The immediacy of his response sends a little thrill through me. Throughout all the ups and downs I've been through with these men, I've never had to doubt whether Frost wants me, and the proof of that fact throbbing against my lower belly makes my core ache with desire.

As I open my mouth, my tongue tangling with his, he thrusts against my

stomach a little, grinding his cock against me like he can't help himself. He's unpracticed in this—I was his first, something that still fucking floors me—but the lack of finesse on his part isn't a turn-off. If anything, it makes me even hungrier for him.

I know I'm not the first woman Kian fucked, or Malix either. And that's okay. I slept with plenty of guys before I met them, so it's only fair, I guess.

But I like knowing that I'll get all of Frost's firsts. I like knowing that after all the bullshit he's been through, all the pain he doesn't deserve, I get to be the one who shows him the other side of that coin—the pleasure that can maybe balance out some of the pain.

"Amora..."

He groans my name against my lips, and I grin, burying my hands in his wet hair and pressing against him even more, letting him hump against my body as he nearly bows me backward with the force of his kiss.

His cock is fully hard now, thick and smooth like a velvet covered rod between us, and I'm overcome by the sudden urge to look at it. To touch it.

So I do, stepping backward out of Frost's embrace. He looks startled by the loss of my touch, but he makes a soft growling noise when he sees my gaze drop to his crotch. His cock, already jutting out from his body, jerks a little in response to my attention, and I bite my lip to hide my hungry grin.

I want that.

I want all of this man.

Dragging my gaze back up to Frost's face, I let my smile break free. "I want to go down on you. Is that okay? I want to put your cock in my mouth."

He swallows. The movement of his throat is clearly visible as his Adam's apple bobs. Then he nods—one short, sharp jerk of his chin.

That's all I need.

Dropping to my knees on the shower floor, I let the water pour down over my head and shoulders as I run my hands up Frost's muscular legs. They tense under my touch, turning hard as steel, and my pussy throbs.

"You can show me what you like," I murmur, leaning in a little to dart my tongue out and drag it over the tip of his cock. "I don't know what kinds of things you enjoy most, so you can tell me when I get it right, if you want."

"Okay."

Frost's voice is a low rasp, and I glance up, blinking water out of my eyelashes to see him gazing down at me with a rapt, almost awed look on his face.

"Usually, when I give a blowjob, I like to start a little slow," I tell him. As I speak, I wrap my fist around the base of his cock, angling it toward my lips a little. Then I drag my tongue over his smooth, rounded head.

"Ahhh..."

Frost groans, a long, low sound. It sounds almost tortured, but in a good way—like he's realizing just how intense some kinds of pleasure can be.

"I like to use my hand and my mouth," I continue, showing him what I mean by wrapping my lips around him and bobbing my head a few times, moving my fist along with it.

"God. Amora." He practically grunts those words, his hips jerking toward my face.

"Do you like that?" I murmur.

"Yes."

"Good," I purr, heat blazing through my body at the rough sound of his voice.

I stop narrating what I'm doing then, because I don't want to pull my mouth away from him long enough to speak. Instead, I just *show* him, using every trick I've ever learned to push his pleasure higher and higher.

My fist grips him tightly as I hollow my cheeks and slide up and down his length, and when I bring my other hand up to play with the heavy sack between his legs, I feel his knees buckle a little. He growls, gripping my hair as if he's trying to steady himself, and I take that as a sign to continue.

I play with his balls, rolling them gently between my fingers before pulling off his cock with a wet slurp so I can lick and suck at them too, teasing him until he's muttering curses under his breath and shifting his hips.

When I return to his cock, he thrusts deeper as soon as my lips wrap around him, and heat flares inside me at his caveman-like response to my touch. His hand grips my hair tighter, and he starts to fuck my face, driving his cock deeper into my throat.

I've never had much of a gag reflex, but this is testing my limits. Tears burn in the corners of my eyes, and I drop my hold on his cock, gripping his hips instead as I let him use me for his pleasure.

Water is cascading over my face, and I keep having to blink droplets out of my eyelashes. Every once in a while, Frost draws back a little, and I suck in a lungful of air when he does, but I'm low on oxygen. It makes my head swim a little, but rather than sending panic through me, it gives me a strange sense of euphoria.

Being used by Frost as he chases the pleasure that's been denied to him for basically his whole life isn't terrifying.

It's... freeing.

Malix said I looked like a goddess when I jerked off him and Kian, and right now, I *feel* like one. I feel wild and free as I take Frost deeper into my throat, swallowing around him when he pauses with his cock buried inside me. My hands slide around to clutch at his ass as he fucks my face, breathing loudly in the small cocoon of the shower.

I can feel him thickening against my tongue, and I know he must be close. So I push him even further.

Keeping one hand on the firm roundness of his ass as it flexes with each thrust, I slide the other between his muscled cheeks until I find the puckered hole between them. I slip one finger inside, and Frost lets out a roar.

At first, I think he's pissed at me for sticking a finger up his ass. But then his hips jerk forward in two more harsh thrusts and he spills his release down my throat, shuddering and shaking with each jet of cum that erupts from his shaft. I swallow it, sliding my finger deeper into his ass as I do, and his upper body bows over me as if he can't even manage to remain upright.

When his cock finally softens a little, the last few droplets wrung out of him, I draw back, gasping for air. My throat is a little raw, but when I look up into Frost's face, I don't even care about that.

His pupils are large, darkening his light blue eyes, and his lips are parted slightly. His chest rises and falls, and despite his clearly heightened emotions, the dark shadow marks on his body are mostly still.

I slip my finger out of his ass, and he shivers again, reaching down to haul me up and pull me into his arms. His lips find mine, and he kisses me like he's been wanting to do it this whole time.

When we finally break apart, he rests his forehead against mine.

"Did you like that?" I murmur, holding on to him and delving my fingers into the wet hair at the nape of his neck.

His whole body shudders one last time, as if the question alone was a turn-on.

"Yes," he murmurs roughly. "So much."

F R O S T

MY HEART IS BEATING TOO hard. It should be painful, but somehow, it's not.

I feel like it's trying to crack my ribs open so that it can get closer to Amora, but I already know that even if it could, it still wouldn't be close enough.

My eyes fall shut, and I breathe in the scent of her skin and her arousal. It hovers in the air, infusing the steam from the shower with her unique smell. In my mind, I can still picture her on her knees in front of me, her lips stretched around my cock. I can see myself thrusting in and out of that perfect mouth, see the way her cheeks hollow as she tries to drag me back in every time I draw back.

I want to do that all over again. I want to come down her throat and then smear the last few drops on her beautiful lips. I want to lay her out on the bed and stroke myself until I spill my release all over her, then rub it into her skin until she's marked so thoroughly by me that she'll never be able to doubt that she's mine.

"I wasn't sure if you'd be into everything I did," she admits in a quiet voice, tilting her head a bit so that she can press a little kiss to my lips. When she tries to draw away, I chase her mouth, claiming another kiss and allowing it to deepen before we separate again.

"I like everything you do," I answer simply.

She chuckles. "Well, I'm glad. That... that really turned me on. I like seeing you like this, lost in pleasure—giving yourself over to it. I like how you use me. How you figure out what feels good with me." She pulls away a little, gazing up into my eyes with a serious expression. "You've had so much pain, Frost. I wish I could take it away, erase it from your past, but I know I

can't. I can give you pleasure, though. And I want to."

Her words feel like a balm on my soul, and I pull her into my arms, lifting her feet off the shower floor as I kiss her again. She yelps into my mouth but doesn't protest, wrapping her arms and legs around me. My cock is already hardening again, throbbing for my mate, for more of the connection between us.

She must feel it, because she rubs herself against me, tightening her legs around my waist to give herself leverage as she slides her core against my cock.

"Do you want more?" she murmurs, her voice husky.

"Yes," I answer immediately.

Her grin is almost blinding, and I can't resist kissing it. I can't resist anything about her.

When we separate, she tilts her head down a little, giving me a teasing look from beneath her eyelashes. "What do you want? Tell me, Frost. Whatever it is, I want to give it to you."

My body goes tense as a dozen different images flood my mind all at once. I picture claiming my mate in as many different ways as I can imagine, seeing her breasts sway with each thrust and hearing her moans of pleasure. The sudden rush of images is so overwhelming that I can't speak for a moment. I can't sort out what I want most.

I want all of it.

All of *her*.

Finally, I clear my throat, holding her up with one hand while I trail the fingertips of my other over her smooth jaw. My voice is raspy when I speak, and my cock is hard as a rock now.

"I want to fuck you from behind. I want to see your ass shake. See your back arch as you take me. I want to kiss you like that, turning your head to meet my lips when I'm buried inside you."

Amora's eyes flare wide, her mouth dropping open a little as color rushes up her chest and cheeks, turning them pink. Her eyes spark with something, and she crushes her lips to mine in a kiss that makes me worried I'll come against her stomach, without even getting to be inside her again.

When we break apart, she wriggles in my arms, and I set her down. She reaches over to shut off the spray of the shower, then pulls the curtain aside and steps out of the tub. I expect her to reach for one of the small towels that have been left for us. But instead, she walks over to the little sink and rests

her hands on the countertop that surrounds it, bending over.

My stomach clenches, my balls drawing up tight. Water cascades down my body as I climb out of the tub after her, but I don't pay any attention to it. My gaze is riveted to the curve of her ass, and the way her spine curves as she looks over her shoulder at me with a heated gaze.

"Like this?" she asks.

"Yes."

I can't say any more words than that. I can't even think.

My hand reaches out, and I watch it trace over the curves of her body.

This doesn't seem real. After nearly being swallowed up by my shadows, it doesn't feel real that I'm here in this steam-filled bathroom with my mate, the scent of sex filling the air between us.

But it must be. I've never been able to imagine anything as good as this.

Both of my hands are roaming over her body now, and Amora doesn't tell me what to do. She just lets me explore her at my own pace. I try to keep my touch light, but I can't help gripping and massaging her ass cheeks, feeling how firm and smooth they are against my palms.

The way she's bent over gives me a partial view of her pussy, and I lick my lips as I gaze down at her flushed pink opening.

Without even thinking, I drop down to my knees. If I were a good person, maybe I could say I'm doing this because she gave me pleasure before.

But the truth is, I just need to taste her.

I *need* it, more than I need air.

My fingers dig into her ass cheeks, dragging them wider so that I can see more of her, and Amora gasps, gripping the countertop more tightly. When I bury my face between her legs and thrust my tongue inside her, she goes up on her tiptoes, making a strangled sound in her throat.

She tastes so good. Like nothing I've ever experienced before—something that's only *Amora*.

It's addictive, and I slide my tongue all over her pussy, trying to get as much of it as I can. With my hands still holding her ass cheeks apart, I can see her other hole too, and I grunt softly as I remember what it felt like when she put her finger up my ass.

I don't know *why* it felt good, but it did. It pushed me over the edge of my climax, heightening everything else I was feeling until I couldn't hold back anymore.

Would it feel good for her too?

Probably. She knows more about pleasure than I do.

Rather than exploring with my finger, I drag my tongue away from her core, running it over the small expanse of skin between her pussy and her asshole before circling the little round hole.

“Oh, shit. Oh, fuck! God!”

She squirms against the counter, pulling away from me a little before pressing back into my touch, and I grin as I slide my tongue around her hole again.

She likes it.

My cock pulses, little droplets of cum sliding down my shaft. I like it too. I like it so much that my pulse is racing faster, my hands digging into her skin as my hips pulse against nothing. I draw back, breathing hard.

“I need...” I trail off for a moment, not sure how to express what I want. “To be inside you,” I finally finish, deciding on the simplest form of the truth.

“Fuck. Yes, Frost. Please,” Amora murmurs, wriggling her ass again as I press up to stand behind her. The scent of her arousal is even heavier in the air now than it was before, and it feels like it might drive me out of my mind.

My hands slide around to grip her hips firmly, and I spread my legs, bending my knees a little to line myself up with her entrance. I press inside, groaning as her wet heat clenches around the tip of my cock.

It feels too good. It’s too much.

With a savage grunt, I thrust forward all the way, burying myself inside her. She lets out a guttural groan, and it mixes with the sound I make.

My heart is beating too hard again. I feel like I might tear out of my own skin, I’m so desperate for more of this woman.

“Yes, Frost,” she whispers again, her back arching. “Fuck me. Fuck me, please.”

Please.

She wants me.

She needs me.

Just like I need her.

That thought unleashes something inside me. With a low noise, I draw out and then thrust right back into her, reveling in the tightness of her pussy as it clenches my cock. I do it again and again, bottom out in her every time, slamming in as deep as I can go and still trying to get even deeper. My hips slap against her ass, and the flesh jiggles with every thrust.

Hungry for everything I envisioned, I catch her chin in one hand and turn

her head, pressing my lips to hers as our bodies move together.

When I finally release my hold on her chin, she gives a soft little whimper, her head drooping as if she doesn't have the strength to hold it up. I keep driving into her, rattling the things on the bathroom counter with every thrust.

"Right there," she gasps, lifting her head suddenly as her back arches. "Shit, right there. Oh, god, I'm so close."

The raw desire in her voice is like a siren song. I try to do exactly what she asked for, adjusting the angle of my hips a little and pounding into her harder and faster. She's breathing in short, choppy gasps, and she's so tight around me that I can only manage short thrusts.

But it feels so good.

Better than anything.

It feels *perfect*.

"Frost!" Amora lets out a breathless cry, and her walls ripple around me as she comes. An electric charge of pleasure shoots through me, and I wrap one arm around her waist, gripping her jaw with my other hand as I pull her upright. I thrust into her two more times as my head drops down to the crook of her neck, and I bite the soft skin there as my cock spasms.

It feels like I pour a piece of my soul into Amora along with my cum.

Even after there's nothing left, I keep thrusting softly into her warm body, never wanting to lose this connection with her.

Never wanting to lose *her*.

AMORA

THE COUNTERTOP IS CUTTING into my thighs, but rather than being uncomfortable, it only heightens the aftermath of my orgasm.

I cling to the edges of the sink, breathing hard, my legs shaking. Frost releases the spot on my neck where he's probably left a hickey, leaving a trail of kisses across the line of my shoulder, and I press my hips back against him, a little moan escaping me. He nuzzles my shoulder with a soft growl that sends warmth flooding through me.

It's a rare glimpse into the not so stoic side of this man.

And I fucking love it.

Frost kisses the place where he bit me one more time, then he pulls out and grabs a towel off the rack. He gently cleans up the mess between my legs, taking entirely too long and having entirely too much fun with the friction of the fabric on my uber-sensitive clit. I'm nearly panting again by the time he tosses the towel aside and sweeps me into his arms.

I'm so startled when my feet suddenly leave the ground that I laugh. He cradles me against his chest, his arms under my shoulders and knees, bridal style, and carries me out of the bathroom.

It's so ridiculous, and quite frankly so *Frost*, that I can't help but keep laughing.

Kian raises his head from the back of the armchair as we emerge from the steamy bathroom, and Malix glances over at us from where he's parked on the couch. I don't care that they're watching, or that they know exactly what went down in the bathroom. All four of us know what this is by now. We went from being enemies to lovers to maybe more, and hell, at least I'm no longer trying to kill them. The fact that I've had sex with all three of them

seems like a minor detail at this point. Much less of an issue than all of the other shit we've been through together.

Frost carries me into the small bedroom and gently lays me down on the patchwork quilt. I shove the blankets aside and move over as he climbs in beside me. He collapses onto the mattress, palming the back of my head and pressing another hungry kiss to my lips.

When we separate, his eyelids droop, and he blinks slowly.

He looks tired, and I don't blame him. I'm exhausted after the day we've had, and mine was a lot easier than Frost's. Not to mention the toe-curling sex we just had, which would be enough to knock anyone out.

The light in the kitchen extinguishes, and I glance at the bedroom door to see both Malix and Kian making their way toward the bed. Nobody speaks or bothers to ask permission, because at this point, it's just kind of a given that we're going to share the bed.

Kian lifts the blankets behind me and slides in against my body. He's still fully clothed, but as he settles in beside me, his hard cock nudges my ass. Malix steps up on the other side of Frost and falls into the bed, one arm draping above Frost's head so that he can touch my hair.

I can smell their arousal. Both of them.

Listening to Frost fuck me in the bathroom turned them on.

My pussy clenches, my clit throbbing as if it just realized maybe it isn't so worn out after all.

The knowledge that I'm in bed with three hot, hard bodies sends a wave of dizzying heat through me. My heart rate, which was already high after what happened in the bathroom, kicks up even more.

How am I still so fucking *hungry* for these men?

Frost gave me more than enough pleasure for one night—or so I would've thought. But I'm ready for another round already, desire pooling in my core as Kian's hard length presses against my ass.

But Malix digs his fingers into my hair and peeks at me over Frost's head. "Sleep, kitty. That's what you need most right now. You can't even keep your eyes open."

"Dammit," I grumble, flushing a little at the fact that he knows me well enough by now to guess exactly what I was just thinking.

Kind of like how I can read Frost, Malix can read me.

"All right, all right," I mutter. "Sleep."

He runs his blunt nails over my scalp, making sparks cascade down my

body. "Good girl."

The moment I close my eyes, I drift away, succumbing to sheer exhaustion and the comforting warmth of the men around me.

I SLEEP SO deep and hard that when I surface again, I feel a momentary burst of panic that I don't know where I am or what day it is. I'm so drowsy that I feel like I've shifted dimensions entirely—fallen right out of bed into the twilight zone.

But I haven't. I know innately that I've just had the best sleep of my life, or at least the first real, deep rest I've had in years.

My eyes slowly adjust and focus to take in the dark room. I'm on my side, with Frost's long, lean form pressed flush against my back. Malix's fingers are still in my hair, and his leg is thrown over both of us. They're both sound asleep, their breaths deep and even.

But the other side of the bed is empty, and a dark silhouette is moving across the room.

Fight or flight kicks in. I almost leap up off the bed, ready to knock the intruder into the next county.

Before I can make an absolute ass of myself, I catch a whiff of whiskey and woodsmoke, and my sleepy eyes register that the dark form making his way toward the bed is a familiar one.

Kian tugs the covers aside and slips back onto the mattress beside me. He lies facing me, his brown eyes like coal in the pitch black room.

I raise an eyebrow in question, wondering what got him up in the middle of the night.

His hand alights on my hip in a possessive, almost unconscious move. He keeps his voice low as he replies, "Checking to see if our bodyguards are still on duty."

"Are they?" I whisper.

He nods grimly. "Mostly new wolves, but Cormac is still on the porch across the street."

"He takes his job seriously."

"No kidding."

"What time is it?" I ask.

Kian closes his eyes, and his thumb rubs a lazy circle on my hip. “Half past two.”

Not as late as I thought when I woke up. I must have been sleeping like the dead. Not exactly the height of proper security, since someone could have come into the cabin and ax murdered me in that deep of a catatonic state.

That thought leads me to another. “Do you think we should have set our own guard? We all just crashed out. Maybe someone should be awake at all times to make sure none of Felicity’s wolves try anything.”

A low rumble rises from Kian’s chest, and he opens his eyes, narrowing his gaze on me. “I dare them to try. They’ll regret it if they do.”

I recognize the hard glint in his eyes and the hard set of his jaw. It’s the feral side of him surfacing—that stoic, angry edge to him I’ve come to know.

More than know, really. *Understand*.

Then Kian’s face softens, almost as if he’s recognized my thoughts without me having to say a word.

Shit. I didn’t think I projected my emotions *that* much.

His hand goes still on my waist. “How’s Frost doing?”

“What do you mean?” I whisper, confused by the question. “You would know as well as I do. The four of us have been together twenty-four-seven for weeks.”

Kian’s lips quirk up on one side into a half-smile, barely visible in the shadows. “We’re close, Frost, Malix, and me. Like brothers. Maybe even deeper than that with everything we’ve been through together. But what Frost has with you is different. You unlock a part of him that no one else can.”

I go completely still, touched by his words. Frost has said something similar in the past, but hearing the same sentiment from Kian really drives home how true it is. Kian isn’t the kind of man to hype up someone else just for fun, and he’s certainly not going to tell me something that he doesn’t truly believe.

“So,” Kian adds when I don’t respond, “I want to know, specifically, how do you think he’s doing?”

I take a breath and readjust my head on the pillow. “He’s okay. I think. He’s been through a lot, and now things are just different. I think, given time, he’ll figure it out. Find a new normal. I have faith in him.”

Kian studies me for a moment. Even in the shadowy room, I can still make out the play of emotions across his rugged face. I swear, it seems like he’s constantly at war with whatever emotions are vying for his attention.

Finally, he slides his palm over my elbow, then gently trails it up my bicep. “You’re good for him. You’re good for both of my brothers.”

His fingers halt on the sensitive skin of my neck, directly under my ear. Heat blooms outward from his touch, and my breath hitches.

“What about you?” I whisper. “Am I good for you?”

Something passes through his eyes, the gold rings around his irises glinting in the darkness. “Yeah. You’re good for me, too.”

We both move at the same time, meeting in the middle as our lips find each other in a kiss. Kian’s mouth dominates mine in the same way his body dominates mine during sex. He cups my face, using his thumbs to tilt my head back, to fully open me to his kiss. His tongue claims my mouth with the same confident power, but this kiss is more of a slow burn than a raging passion.

Desire stirs in my belly, but this time, it’s more than that. The kiss lingers for several long moments, both of us lost in each other, enjoying the simple act of exploring each other like this.

I think it’s the first time ever that Kian and I have kissed just for the sake of kissing—for all the other things a kiss can mean beyond the sexual aspect. Lying in his arms like this, kissing with no end in sight, makes me feel young and carefree. No expectations beyond this moment. This kiss.

Finally, Kian slows the movement of his lips, then gives me several small, lingering pecks before he breaks away from me. But he doesn’t release me. We gaze into each other’s eyes, and I’m *sure* he can feel the way my heart is racing.

There’s so much I want to say, but the words all get trapped in a jumble behind my lips.

Nearly every moment between me and Kian has been explosive. From the arguing and butting heads to the passionate sex to the weird way we always dance around each other, testing each other, trying to figure out where we fit and how.

There are so many unspoken words between us that it would be impossible for me to try to speak them into existence.

Not right now.

I just want to enjoy this moment.

So I nestle closer to him, tucking my head against his chest. His chin rests comfortably on the top of my head, and he curls his arm around my waist, sliding it comfortably between me and Frost. I can tell, somehow, that it isn’t

meant to come between us, but for Kian to be able to have a connection with his brother too.

It's a reminder how much he loves them both.

Maybe one day, he'll love me too.

I sink into the soft, comforting sensation of being surrounded by these three men. Although they shouldn't be my mates—and the situation there is as tangled and complex as a spider's web—I still feel a deep, soul-level connection to them.

That strange remaining bond, which I still don't quite understand, soothes me back to sleep.

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AMORA

CORMAC KNOCKS on our door early. When Kian goes to answer, the other man greets us with a good-natured smile that seems at odds with the fact he spent at least half the night watching our cabin like a damn creeper.

“Alpha Felicity is waiting for you,” he informs us, jerking his chin. “All set?”

Kian answers in the affirmative, and I look down at my giant t-shirt and ill-fitting shorts, wishing I had something a little more presentable to wear. Unfortunately, the cabin’s clothes closet is stocked with nothing but random hand-me-downs and cast-offs, which is why my collar hangs down nearly to my tits.

As we leave the cabin for the already hot morning, Kian, Malix, and Frost crowd in around me possessively, as if one of Felicity’s wolves might try to steal me away and make off with me. I roll my eyes as we fall in behind Cormac, but their attention still warms my chest a little.

Kian hasn’t mentioned the moment we shared last night, acting as if nothing happened the whole time we ate the breakfast that was dropped off this morning. But I do notice he sticks close to my side as we head away from the cabin.

Cormac takes the road away from the hillside that holds the long cafeteria building. We pass several rows of houses, most of them silent this early in the morning, then we circle around the edge of the horseshoe shaped rock formation.

An amphitheater is built into the back side of the formation. Shallow stone seats stair-step up the rounded cliffside, probably enough to fit Felicity’s whole pack, although only the first few rows are full at the

moment.

A segment of seats at the front of the theater has been left empty for us. Cormac motions for us to have a seat, then he moves to join Felicity on the dais, which is actually just a giant flat boulder in the middle of the space.

One thing I really like about the Silver Crest pack's village is the seamless relationship they have with nature. From the way their houses look so natural, to this stone and rock amphitheater. It's a calming, grounding place.

As long as we don't die here, I guess.

I glance behind me as I sit on the cool stone stair. Most of the shifters in the vicinity are watching us closely, some of them obviously suspicious of us while others appear to be merely curious. I don't know how much Felicity told her people when she called this meeting, but it feels like a small victory that not everyone is staring at us like we're psychopaths.

Malix leans in close enough to murmur in my ear. "It's you, kitty. You normalize us."

I raise an eyebrow in his direction, not even surprised at this point that he basically read my thoughts. "Me? That's crazy talk."

He shakes his head and nudges me playfully with his shoulder. "Look at the rest of us. Big. Scary. Covered in shadow tattoos that do things real tattoos don't. Then look at you. Don't underestimate the power of a beautiful woman with an angel's face."

I scoff, but my cheeks turn hot just the same. Angel face. Jesus Christ, he's such a charmer.

Frost touches my knee in a quiet, affectionate way, although his gaze remains on Felicity and the group of shifters surrounding her on the platform. They're talking amongst themselves, as if waiting for the cue to begin. Beyond the platform, several wolves walk the perimeter, their snouts in the wind and their attention split between watching the outside and watching the gathered crowd.

Felicity clearly doesn't skimp when it comes to protection, which makes a hell of a lot of sense, given her history.

After a few moments, Felicity descends the stone stairs to the ground and strolls over to us. Her long blonde hair is pulled into a low ponytail today, and although she's dressed casually, she exudes confidence and power. All four of us stand to greet her.

She offers Frost a surprisingly genuine smile. "How are you feeling

today?"

He nods, a bit stiffly. "Better. Thank you, alpha."

"I'm glad to hear it," she returns, then glances at the rest of us. "I hope you don't mind, but I pulled together my strongest warriors for this meeting."

"Not at all," I reply. In fact, it seems like a good sign, if I look at it from the perspective that she's brought in her best warriors to prepare for a fight with Quinton... not us.

Of course, I could be getting that wrong.

Felicity leaves us and climbs back up onto the boulder platform as Cormac extends a hand down to help her. Then she turns to the crowd and raises her hands for silence. Within seconds, the chatter dies away completely. Another example of just how much respect this pack has for their alpha.

"My thanks to those of you who were able to respond to my call for this impromptu meeting," Felicity says, her dark gaze sweeping over the shifters around us. "You likely recognize the three men in the front row. They and their companion, Amora, arrived yesterday evening with a plea for help."

There's a soft rustling sound as most of the people gathered in the amphitheater shift in their seats to peer over at us. I do my best to keep my expression neutral, even though I hate being stared at like this. I've never been one to enjoy being in the spotlight, and even if I were, this isn't the kind of spotlight I'd want to have.

"As you know," she continues, "Quinton began to fail us many years ago. His sick obsession with the shadow realm led us to break away and come here to put down roots. We know now, thanks to Kian, Malix, Frost, and Amora, that Quinton's mental state has deteriorated even more. He's now not only a danger to us, but to his own pack... and the world."

I meet Kian's gaze and widen my eyes at him. It's starting to sound like she believes us without needing to be convinced. Our little brainstorming session last night might not even have been necessary.

"A few of you are not transplants from Quinton's pack," Felicity says to the crowd. "So I thought that for your benefit, and Amora's, I might give you a bit of backstory so you would have context for the conversation we're here to have."

She walks to the edge of the boulder and sits, letting her muscular, tanned legs dangle over the edge. Once she's comfortable, she begins. "My ex-mate stumbled across a cave once in the deepest wilds of Colorado, outside our

pack lands. While exploring, he found a stone that seemed to be imbued with a very powerful magic. Assuming it to be something of a witchcraft nature, he brought it home.”

The alpha goes silent for a moment, staring into the middle distance as if she’s gazing at something in her mind’s eye.

“I wish it *had* been witchcraft,” Felicity finally continues, her voice growing softer. “Maybe he wouldn’t have lost himself in his quest if it were. Unfortunately, the stone was in fact a small piece of the shadow realm. An object made of material from that plane and imbued with all the power of that world. He sent wolves to the cave for weeks afterward hoping to find more, although he never did.”

God, it was *that* simple? Quinton *accidentally* came across the stone?

Between this and the damn prophecies hanging over me and my men, I’m starting to think that fate is a real fucking bitch.

Felicity takes a breath, her expression hardening. “Shadow magic isn’t a positive influence. Within days of him experimenting with the stone, he grew addicted to its power. As with any addiction, what he had was never enough. He craved more. He grew obsessed with gaining more and more power.”

Her hands curl into fists, and her gaze flicks down toward the three men sitting beside me.

“When he created hybrid shadow shifters, I lost faith in him. I tried to change his mind, tried to get him to give up the madness of his pursuit of *more* power, but no matter what I did, he refused. I was finally forced to walk away.”

Felicity’s focus seems to turn inward again, as if she’s reliving those last days with the man she was supposed to be mated to for the rest of her life. I can’t imagine how much she hurts, a pain that must reverberate all the way down to her soul. It must be incredibly difficult to relive what was likely the worst time in her life.

“I refused to be a part of his descent into insanity,” she goes on. Her voice has fallen quiet, but the watching group is so riveted to her story that I could hear an eagle cry in Idaho at this point. “Although I thought the love we had was genuine and real, it paled in comparison to his love of power. Nothing I said could convince him to stop. Nothing I did could make him see reason.”

She swallows, a muscle in her cheek rippling as she clenches her jaw. “Some in the Blood Moon pack supported him. Others were too afraid to stand up to him. I took as many as I could when I left, but those who were

left behind..." She shakes her head. "I hope some of them have come to see what he truly is."

Beside me, Kian makes a noise low in his throat. I wonder if he has an opinion on how many of Quinton's followers are with him out of loyalty and how many are with him out of fear.

I make a mental note to ask him about that later, although I'm not sure how much difference it makes. Doing shitty stuff because you're scared of what will happen if you don't isn't a whole lot better than doing shitty stuff just because you want to. The people whose lives you fuck up get hurt regardless.

"The stone that Quinton found holds a great deal of power," Felicity continues, breaking me out of my thoughts. "But it *is* finite. He lived in fear of the day its power would fade, leaving him with nothing. That's what drove his obsession with finding a way to access the shadow realm. It's what drives him even now."

The pain in her voice is so deep. So absolute.

It's fucking heartbreaking.

In a way, I know what it's like to feel what she felt. I too had a rift form between me and my mates.

Of course, we started off at war and slowly mended the bad blood between us until we were no longer enemies, but allies and lovers. Felicity's rift has moved in the opposite direction, going from good to bad to worse. She loved Quinton once, and then gave up on him when it became clear what kind of person he is.

I can't even imagine how lonely she must feel. They always say it's better to have loved and lost than to have never loved at all, but anyone who says shit like that clearly never had to leave their fated mate.

"Our separation was ugly," Felicity continues. "Particularly when I tried to steal his precious stone. The tensions between us have been high ever since. I feel an... obligation to stop him. He's my mate, after all. Even now, after all these years apart. I've always felt like perhaps I'm the only one who could even try to stop him from achieving his goal. From hurting more people in his quest to gain power." Felicity looks pointedly at Kian, Malix, and Frost. "I've always regretted that I couldn't protect you from him."

Kian speaks up, his voice subdued in a way I don't think I've ever heard from him before. "We were not your responsibility, alpha."

"No, but I cared for you in those early years, while your mothers..." She

trails off and chews on her lower lip. “They were my friends. I failed them too.”

Quiet settles over the amphitheater. Felicity straightens her spine and rolls her neck, as if she’s shaking off the weight of her past to prepare for the future.

“I propose we join forces,” she says to Kian. “After leaving the four of you yesterday evening, I communed with the ancestors and meditated on the best path forward. I believe this is it.”

A ripple of low conversation starts up around us, but Felicity raises her voice and goes on. “Our best chance to end this is to destroy the stone. Without it, Quinton is nothing. Without it, he will lose his means of pursuing more power. Without it... we can deal with him once and for all.”

I lean forward a little, resting my elbows on my knees. “What do you propose?”

“My pack and I will stage an attack on Blood Moon lands. Not a full-scale battle, but a quick and dirty distraction. While we’re distracting Quinton and his followers, the four of you will sneak into the village and steal the stone.”

It sounds like a good plan on the surface, but there’s a glaring issue that I don’t think she’s considering. “Doesn’t he keep the stone with him? I would think if he’s so fucking attached to it, he’d have it with him at all times.”

She shakes her head. “No. When I was with him, he refused to sleep with the stone for fear that someone would attack in the night and kill him for it. He has a hiding place somewhere in the village—I just don’t know where it is. He never trusted me enough to tell me.”

Kian speaks then. “We know.”

I glance over at him where he sits on the other side of Malix, finding an almost savage smile on his face.

“We know where he hides the stone,” he repeats.

Felicity purses her lips, looking thoughtful. “Does he know you know?”

Kian’s smile widens, becoming even more vicious, if possible. “No. We came across the information accidentally.”

I snort. “Kinda like how he found the stone.”

“Good.” Felicity’s dark eyes blaze, and I can practically see the gears moving at top speed in her mind as she formulates a plan in her head. “That means we’ll have the element of surprise on our side, not just in our attack but in the true purpose of our mission. He doesn’t know you’re here or that

we've joined forces. He's likely arrogant enough that the thought hasn't even occurred to him. So we attack, you get the stone, then we'll rendezvous to discuss what happens next."

It's been only Felicity's voice for so long, so when Cormac's deep voice cuts into our conversation, it almost startles me.

"Alpha," he rumbles. "May I speak to you privately?"

Felicity glances back at her right-hand man. "What is it? Anything you have to say can be said before the group."

Cormac's expression hardens, and he casts a glare in Kian's direction. "Alpha, I'm concerned about sending the feral shifters after the stone. What if they're only in this because they want to steal it for themselves?"

"Are you questioning my judgement?" Felicity asks, one eyebrow lifting slightly. She's clearly confident enough in her position as alpha that she doesn't even sound angry, just curious.

"No, alpha," Cormac replies smoothly. He rubs a hand down his long red beard and nods in our direction. "I question their intentions."

Another shifter somewhere behind us adds her voice to the dissent. "What if it's a trick?"

"Quinton could have sent them to confuse you and infiltrate our pack," another man suggests.

A bunch of voices rise at once as the pack airs their grievances against us. I only have to hear a few seconds of their aggressive disagreement to know that they still don't trust us.

"Let *them* wage the battle," a female suggests loudly. "While we locate the stone. That way, if they're betrayers, they won't have a chance to turn on us."

I try to block out all the voices and let Felicity handle the situation. I'm not the alpha, and the muscled blonde woman is obviously well respected among her pack. But as her wolves start talking about my mates, making judgments about their characters based on where they come from and the shadows inside them, anger begins to build in my chest like steam in a pressure cooker.

Maybe it's because I see their prejudices as a reflection of my own. I made a lot of assumptions about the feral shifters in the beginning too. I thought they were evil. I thought they were evil through and through, incapable of kindness or compassion or even *humanity*.

But I know better now. And hearing others make those same assumptions

infuriates me.

Don't fight with Felicity's pack. Don't fight with Felicity's pack...

I grit my teeth, repeating the words over and over in my head like a mantra, hoping that will calm me down.

It doesn't work.

Before I can wrestle my emotions back under control, they all spill over. I stand abruptly, whirling on the group behind us and snarling at the gathered crowd.

“Shut the fuck up!”

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MALIX

I STARE at Amora as she glares at the crowd like a righteous goddess, feeling impressed, shocked, and a little fucking turned on.

“You don’t know anything about these men,” she snaps, her voice as hard as diamond and everything about her just as gorgeous. “Most of you haven’t even seen them in years. You don’t know where they’ve been or what Quinton has done to them. You don’t get to sit there on your fucking pedestals and act like you’re better than them because of something a *madman* did to them against their will.”

I didn’t realize the silence could get even quieter than it was during Felicity’s speech, but clearly, I was wrong. Even the wind seems to die down and shut up in the face of Amora’s fury, like she’s some kind of earth spirit screaming at the wolves to fuck around and find out.

“If you’re going to further the divide forced on them by Quinton, then you’re no better than that asshole,” Amora finishes, pointing a finger menacingly at the gaping crowd. “So either get your prejudices out of your heads and accept the fact that these men can help you, or *leave* and let the adults talk.”

In the stunned silence after her tirade, Amora glares around the crowd as if daring someone to say anything else. I know without a doubt that if one more fucker opens his mouth, he’ll find out just how hard she can punch.

Damn, that shit is hot as hell

I’ve known since day one that Amora is the most stubborn and strong-willed woman I’ve ever met in my life. But seeing her be all tough and take-no-shit, especially in defense of me and my brothers, makes me want to throw her over my shoulder caveman-style and take her back to the cabin for

an all-day fuckfest.

How does a woman become *that* beautiful and *that* badass, all at once?

A few nearly silent mutters filter through the crowd, but no one actually speaks up.

Probably scared for their damn lives. I would be too.

I twist in my seat and glance back at the crowd, surprised to see that many of them look a bit chagrined. Many of them avoid looking at Amora, and a few even look kind of impressed.

Seeing the other wolves back down in the face of her anger makes my cock twitch.

That's *my* badass woman.

My mate.

As I turn around to face the platform again, I realize that for the first time, I just thought of Amora as my mate. My *actual* mate, not just some kind of abstract or "ex-mate" from the potion. The idea of her belonging to me feels right. My wolf agrees with a small, possessive growl.

Honestly, I'm grateful as fuck that the potion Erik made for us didn't work. Halle-fuckin'-lujah for useless-ass witches. I don't know what he did wrong or why it didn't break the bond the way we hired him to do, but I'm not sorry Amora is still here. Still with us.

That means she's in danger, you idiot, a little voice in my head reminds me.

The reminder stings. As shitty as breaking the bond with Amora felt, we did it for a reason. We did it to save her, knowing that embracing the connection between us would doom her to death.

I felt like an asshole leaving her behind on that mountain underneath the Tree of Life. But maybe I'm being more of a selfish asshole *now*. Because even though that fucking witch's vision still hangs over our heads, I don't think I can let her go a second time.

Felicity picks up the thread of conversation again, but I'm barely paying attention anymore.

All I can think about is the seer who told me and my brothers that we would destroy our mate.

That kind of puts a damn damper on the pleased adoration I'm feeling toward Amora. My beautiful, badass woman can't exactly keep being beautiful and badass if she's six feet under because of us.

No. Goddammit, no.

I refuse to believe that her death is the only possibility, the only outcome. She's too precious to us. There has to be a way to keep her close and keep her safe. All three of us would do *anything* to protect her.

We just have to figure out what that *anything* entails.

Shaking myself out of my spiraling inner thoughts, I refocus on what's being said as the discussion continues around me. I know this shit is important, after all, and I'm not gonna be the reason this mission fails.

After Amora's outburst, things in the meeting go much smoother. It's agreed upon that we'll execute Felicity's original plan, since it's good as is, and we've got all the moving parts we need to pull it off.

When it's decided that we'll head out toward Blood Moon pack lands today, I do my best to stifle my groan. I know we can't really afford to wait, but damn. I really wanted a chance to just *chill* for once. This constant racing all over the country used to be my daily grind, but now that we've got Amora, I just want to slow down.

Enjoy my life a bit.

Enjoy *her*.

But I won't get that opportunity right now, despite a burning need to throw a temper tantrum like a fucking kid. Somehow, I don't think kicking the ground and screaming that I'd rather stay here and fuck my girlfriend for three weeks straight would convince the pack to hang back for a while.

Felicity equips us with supplies for the journey—nice backpacks meant for wolf carrying, better clothes for being seen in public, and an assortment of necessities like first aid kits and reusable water bottles. It's probably the most supplies we've ever carried on a mission, and it feels like a good omen. Not just being prepared, but having Felicity so openly give it all to us.

She's as invested in this mission as we are.

We set out before lunch. We're a big crowd—over twenty Silver Crest members will be coming for the skirmish with Quinton's pack, and all of them are big, muscular, trained in combat both in human and wolf form. Turns out, Felicity's been building an army for years, and I can't say I'm surprised to find that out. Of everybody in Quinton's past, she knew firsthand where he was headed, and she prepared accordingly. Which is going to turn the tides well for us, I think.

We cross the Colorado state line on the second day, moving at a fast pace. Frost is feeling much better, so he's able to keep up more so than when we were on our way to Silver Crest lands. That means we can sprint for periods

of time, which shaves days off our journey.

I notice by day three that the Silver Crest pack is giving Amora a wide berth. I'm used to being the outsider—me and both of my brothers. But Amora isn't someone I would expect to be shunned. She's smart, stunningly beautiful, and just the kind of wolf anybody should feel privileged to have at their back. Maybe it's because she stood up for us. Maybe it's because she's more independent, more... *hard* than most women in the Silver Crest pack.

Different is always misunderstood.

By day four, I bring it up to her.

Hey, have you noticed they steer clear of you? I ask in mind speak, pulling up to run alongside her.

Amora snorts and rolls her grass green eyes before she glances over to meet my gaze. She bares her teeth in a wolfish grimace. *Maybe strong women intimidate them.*

They follow Felicity.

Strong women who aren't their alpha, she points out. *See, men are ridiculously fragile. You're all born with this inherent need to be the strongest, fastest, smartest. When you're faced with a woman who doesn't fit your mold... you freak out.*

I chuckle. *I don't know if it's that. Maybe it's more like you don't fit in.*

Amora nods thoughtfully, never breaking stride as we continue to race ahead. *Could be that too. To be honest, ever since leaving my pack, I've become more of a lone wolf than I ever thought I would be. At this point, I don't even know how to have a pack. I've forgotten what it even means.*

I forget sometimes that Amora gave up everything about her life to chase us across the country. It's easy to forget that she had a life before the witch told her about us, her dangerous mates who had to be stopped from wreaking havoc on the world. She was torn from her roots, cast out into her own solitude on a mission to find us.

We were raised in solitude. I've only ever known my brothers as my "pack."

But now... she's a part of that too.

You know, you've got us, I tell her. *Me, Frost, Kian. You'll always have a pack with us, even if it's small.*

She doesn't respond. But she does fall uncharacteristically silent as we continue to lope across the rocky landscape. She seems thoughtful. Bashful. Even sad? Like she's affected by what I've just told her.

I don't like emotions. They're messy and hard to deal with, especially when we're constantly trying to just keep moving in this world. It's easier to defuse with humor so that I don't have to sit with too many heavy feelings.

Or, hear me out, I say, dragging each word out as if I'm coming to some amazing discovery. *Maybe... you're actually an alien.*

Amora laughs, her tongue lolling out. *I think I would know if I was an alien, you goofball.*

I grin to myself as the whole pack picks up speed.

As long as I made her smile, nothing else matters.

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AMORA

OVER THE NEXT FEW DAYS, I keep thinking about what Malix said.

His observation was definitely on point. I'm just as much an outsider among these wolves as the three shadow shifters are. Which is strange, considering I'm not full of shadows, nor am I one of Quinton's pack, so in all actuality, I should fit in with these shifters just fine.

But I've been on my own so long that I might as well be a different breed.

Each day on the move is a blur of running, resting, then running again. We stop for short periods, never staying in one place too long before we set out again. Each night, we hunt, sometimes with Felicity but mostly on our own.

I stick close to my men for most of the journey, despite the fact I have mixed feelings about thinking of them as "my men." That's probably another hold-over from my time alone, blowing like a leaf in the wind with very little to my name—not to mention, I'm still trying to come to terms with the fact that our bond didn't fully break when they slipped me that potion.

The truth is, being surrounded by all the other wolves hasn't lessened my connection to the three feral shifters. If anything, being so "on the outside" seems to have strengthened the bond I feel for my mates. With other people around to compare it to, the bond between us is more obvious—a different kind of connection than I have with anyone else. This is absolutely a mate bond, not just friendship or family. Not like Ridge, or Sable, or anyone back home in Montana.

Home. Ha. Do I even have a home anymore?

I glance at Frost. His white fur gleams like snow in the sunshine, while on the other side of him, Malix's stocky, muscular black wolf looks like the yin

to his yang. To my left, Kian keeps pace with me, and when I glance at him, our eyes meet. There's a kind of understanding between us that we've never had before, and to be honest, it scares me.

Maybe "home" is with them. Wherever they may be.

But what does that say about me? What exists inside me, inside my wolf, that allowed me to forge a mate bond with three dangerous shifters full of darkness? After several years away from my pack, I no longer feel like I can relate to any of these normal shifters. I don't fit in on an atomic level, as if somehow mating with shadow-filled shifters has changed my cosmic makeup.

Does that mean I have darkness, too? Something down deep that calls to their shadows?

The idea is unnerving. A little terrifying.

But it might be the only explanation that makes sense.

We reach the outskirts of Blood Moon pack lands in the early evening of our tenth day of travel. Felicity leads us to a small hidden valley well outside the pack's protective boundaries, and we huddle up for one last check in before the "fun" starts.

It's chilly, but the snow has mostly melted since the last time I was here, minus a few patches here and there that reflect the rays of the setting sun. I sit on my haunches between Frost and Kian, all of us waiting for the rest of the group to gather around. Felicity takes a central position, her salt and pepper speckled wolf short and muscular just like her human form, and silence begins to fall over the pack.

Felicity's strong, sure voice reaches out through mind speak. *All right. You all know the plan. We're going in fast and dirty, but remember, we're going in with the goal of creating a diversion, not falling into a bloodbath. Got it?*

A few snuffles and agreeable snarls pipe up in answer to her question, although I can tell some of her pack are grumpy that they won't get to lay waste to the enemy today. The most important aspect of this plan is retrieving the stone so we can take away Quinton's shadow power and even the playing field.

Once that's done, we can decide on the next course of action, which will probably be war. We just need more time to prepare for that.

Amora, Kian, Frost, and Malix will remain behind while we attack, Felicity goes on. Her dark gaze lands on us. *We'll handle getting the Blood*

Moon wolves to the southern end of the village so that you can access the bunker where Quinton keeps the stone. The moment the enemy pack rallies up a cry, you sneak in to get the stone.

But be fast, she warns us. We'll hold off Quinton's wolves as long as possible, but the quicker you get the stone and we can flee, the better. I don't want any death here today. Her eyes meet mine as she asks, *Think you can handle that?*

I nod my agreement, a little surprised at the pointed way she'd asked *me* that question. I know innately that she's not directing it at me because she thinks I'm going to take on Quinton's pack all by myself, but because my men might.

It occurs to me suddenly that throughout this short period of time that we've been with the Silver Crest pack, Felicity has treated me as a kind of equal. Or a partner. Maybe her acceptance of this plan hinges more on me than on my men. Not that I'll be the big hero in the story, but that when we're in the thick of it, Felicity trusts me to keep my mates in line.

I don't know for sure that it's even possible for me to keep them in line. They've never willingly caved to any of my attempts to sway them from their path. And yet, somehow, here we are on a completely different path than the one they once thought they were born for.

So, hell. Maybe I've changed them more than I thought.

We split up without any further discussion. Kian takes the lead on our end, and we move quickly up the incline, angling toward the village that's still out of view on the other side of the mountain while Felicity leads her wolves around the base of the mountain to attack from the most obvious point.

Is it weird to be here again? I ask, directing the question to all three men.

Malix is the only one who answers me. *Yeah but in a good way,* he says, flashing his violet eyes in my direction. *Like we made the right choice leaving here in the first place.*

Doesn't feel like home anymore, Kian agrees.

My eyes widen at Malix, who looks as wolfishly surprised as I am to hear Kian admit that.

I guess we're all rediscovering what it means to have a home and a pack.

The trees grow thicker as we begin to curve around the mountain, giving us more cover to sneak up on the village in the dusky twilight. My claws dig at the rocky ground and my legs burn from the effort of climbing such a steep

angle at such a fast pace, but we can't stop to rest. We need to be ready when the wolves at the bottom of the mountain start the diversion.

When the trees begin to thin around us, Kian halts and hunkers down behind some overgrowth, still hidden but with a good vantage point. Not only is the village fully visible at a glance, but I can see Felicity and her wolves creeping toward the farthest cabins too. They move swiftly and silently, like wraiths in the dusk.

The village is eerily quiet, given the time of evening, but I can smell a dozen delicious smells on the breeze that tell me we're about to crash dinner.

Suddenly, several vicious snarls tear through the cold, quiet night air. Glass breaks, and a few startled cries join the growls. Light spills from one of the cabins down below as a door slams open, then a piercing howl raises the alarm.

Malix scuffs at the ground with his front paws, his tongue lolling out of his mouth in his excitement. *That's our cue.*

Kian huffs. *No. Not yet.*

We're wasting time!

I nudge Malix's shoulder with my own. *Shh. Just wait.*

We watch in total silence as porch lights pop on at the highest cabins, those only a stone's throw from our hiding place. Wolves begin to pour from the cabins, and I duck deeper into the bushes, peering out between the leaves to watch them race away from us. Down the mountain, where our allies are stirring up trouble.

Now, Kian grunts. Then he takes off.

I fall in behind Malix with Frost on my heels. We stick to the shadows behind the cabins, and all I can do is trust that Kian knows where the hell he's going.

The night fills with the chaos of confused fighting, while Felicity and her wolves communicate in mind speak. So much is happening that I can't seem to focus on anything but the clamor and Felicity's authoritative voice snapping directions to her pack.

As we round the backside of a cabin, a figure looms out of the darkness. It's a female in her human form, clearly as caught off-guard by our appearance as we are by hers. She opens her mouth to scream, whether at us or for help, I don't know.

Kian leaps onto the woman, his jaws clamping onto her face. He takes her down to the ground hard, and when she shrieks, the sound is muffled inside

Kian's mouth.

Do not kill her! I snap.

He growls, and even in the growing dusk, I can see his jaw tighten just a little more.

Don't you dare, I warn him, adding just enough of a menacing growl to make sure he knows I mean business. *No casualties, Kian. Not if we can help it. She was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time.*

He growls, a surly, irritated sound, then slams the woman's head on the ground, knocking her out cold before he opens his jaws and releases her. A dozen small pinpricks of blood line the side of her head where his teeth tore into her skin, but she's breathing, so crisis averted.

The Silver Crest pack's attempts to stir confusion appear to be going well, based on the little communication I can make out of the bedlam. I know Felicity's plans included a kind of darting, figure-eights game that will hopefully keep Quinton's wolves occupied and distracted, without putting any of her shifters in danger. Since that level of the plan seems to be working, I'm buoyed by the idea that our half will go well too.

We enter another copse of trees on the other side of the village. Several yards into the dark forest, a small clearing opens up to the fading sky. Kian stops in the center of the clearing, shadows swirling around him as he returns to human form. For a moment, I think there's nothing here, until he stoops down and hooks a finger into the ground.

A hidden trap door opens, leading to a claustrophobic stairwell that descends into total blackness. Frost and Malix shift, as well, and I'm about to do the same when Kian lays his hand on my head.

"Stay in your wolf form and monitor the fight," he tells me. "If the tides turn, we need to know."

I nod. It makes sense, but it's still odd to be the only wolf left in our group.

With my heart racing and Felicity's voice echoing in my head, I follow my men into the darkness.

AMORA

I STEP off the bottom stair into a cool, musty tunnel, my claws scrabbling for purchase on unnaturally slick stone. The bunker is clearly man-made, between the smooth, poured concrete and the perfectly domed ceiling. It's also strangely quiet down here—the silence not only of the deep underground, but of something more potent.

Something dangerous and otherworldly.

Something like shadow magic, as if the negative energy from Quinton's stone has sunk into the very walls.

The quiet is broken only by Felicity and the pack communicating in mind speak above. I'm glad I can keep tabs on them from this far beneath the ground, just in case things go sideways, but for now, I ignore the pack and focus on the click of my toenails on the stone floor as we hurry down the tunnel.

For several long moments, we're in absolute darkness. I can't see shit, but I have a feeling my companions have little issue seeing through the black with their special shadow shifter eyes. But I've got my ears, and I use my heightened hearing to follow the sound of their bare feet on the ground.

The tunnel curves to the left, then after several yards, it angles back to the right, and flickering firelight fills the hall ahead. It spills through an open archway, illuminating a semi-circle of the floor ahead with a wavering glow. At the promise of our goal waiting for us, we all put on a burst of speed and spill into a domed room.

After the blackness of the tunnel, the torchlight is glaring, even though the room isn't all that brightly lit. I blink a few times, my sensitive wolf eyes adjusting slowly as a sense of dark magic pervades my senses. It's thick and

cloying, like the scent signature of someone who's only just left the area.

Torches line the walls, and the only piece of furniture in the room is a low table in the very center. We approach the table, and I note a variety of objects carefully placed around the table's edges—bleached bones, quartz crystals, bowls of incense, blackened matches in a pewter dish. I'm not a witch, but I'm fairly familiar with the objects of the craft. All of the detritus on the tabletop are things meant for protection.

Someone wanted to make sure this shrine had as much occult backup as possible.

Directly in the center of the table is a black satin pillow beneath an overturned glass bowl. A slight depression in the fabric tells me all I need to know.

The stone isn't here.

"Fuck," Kian swears, tearing the glass lid off the pillow. He tosses it to the concrete floor where it cracks into multiple thick pieces, then he rips the black satin pillow up as if the stone might be hiding beneath it. "It has to be here."

I paw at the floor with a whine while all three men begin to tear apart the shrine in a futile effort to find the stone. Kian circles the perimeter of the room, checking the walls, while Frost ducks beneath the long black tablecloth to search the floor beneath the table. Malix picks up every object on the table one by one, tossing them aside as he searches for the missing stone.

But we don't need to tear the room apart to know the stone isn't here. We can all see where it *should* be, and it's clear as fucking day that it's not there.

We should call off Felicity's pack and retreat. Regroup, figure out a different plan that accounts for the stone being on Quinton's person, then try again later.

Just as I'm about to shift so I can tell the men that, Felicity's voice breaks through my thoughts.

Cormac, head up the mountain! she calls, a slight tinge of worry in her tone. *Darius is surrounded!*

Surrounded?

Shit. That can't be good. Cocking my head to one side, I tune in to their chaotic conversation, trying to figure out what the hell is going on.

They're boxing us in! someone shouts.

Felicity growls. *Kristen, Tara, get to them! Hurry!* She pauses, then snaps, *Amora, can you hear me?*

Startled to hear my name, I rush to answer. *Yes. I hear you, alpha. What's going on out there?*

Please tell me you've got the stone. We need to retreat.

A sick feeling rolls in my stomach. *No. I'm sorry. It's not here.*

Felicity curses. *That son of a... goddammit. We're in trouble. We need—* She cuts off abruptly. *Delaney, behind you!*

My blood turns to ice water.

Shit. We're out of time.

We've already been down here too long, and there's nowhere else in this bunker the stone could be hiding. Felicity and her wolves are being overwhelmed; if they're beaten back, there's a good chance the four of us will get caught.

I stand and whine loudly to catch Kian's attention, and his head whips around in my direction. "What is it?"

I paw at the ground, then turn my eyes to the ceiling.

Alpha! another voice calls out in my mind. *There's something wrong with these wolves—*

There's a beat of silence, then someone else says, *Wolf down! Harley is down!*

Victor's down, too!

Fuck. Felicity's breathless curse is laced with despair. *Shadow shifters. Quinton has made more of them. God help us.*

My skin runs cold.

I let out a piercing howl, then whirl around and race from the room, not bothering to wait to see if my men are following.

Our allies don't have time for that.

The sun has set entirely by the time we burst through the trap door and into the cold night. The din in my head is amplified by the growling and snarling that drifts toward us on the wind. My stomach turns as I hear a yelp echo off the mountaintop, and I fall into a dead sprint as I head toward the far side of the village.

The diversion is no longer just a distraction but a full-on fight by the time we arrive. Wolves clash with wolves, all of them spread out over an area near the edge of the village. I can see in a glance what happened—at some point during the zig-zag distraction, Quinton's wolves managed to separate groups of Felicity's shifters. Their safety in numbers failed when their numbers were separated.

And then the newly made shadow shifters came out to play.

I haven't had a chance to warn my men about what Felicity said—that Quinton has made more shadow shifters. But they've chosen their shadow forms anyway, and as I slow to figure out who needs my help the most, the three of them barrel past me, trailing wispy shadows behind them.

I don't hang around to watch what they do, since I assume they're going after the new shadow shifters. They're the ones best equipped to fight those monsters. Instead, I veer off to the right, heading toward the nearest group of Silver Crest wolves who are up against an equal number of Blood Moon shifters.

Launching through the air, I land on the closest of Quinton's minions and latch on to his scruff, taking him down with my momentum and body weight.

I hit the ground on my side and continue rolling, tossing the wolf off me with the strength of my jaw. He skids away from me on the rocky ground but comes up spitting mad, so that I barely have time to get my paws back under me before he's countering my attack. But my distraction is just what this particular group needed to get the upper hand. Two of the larger Silver Crest males tag team Quinton's wolves one at a time, darting in to attack and then dancing backward, working as a coordinated unit.

We split off to help the others, and I race past Frost as he fights viciously with one of Quinton's new shadow shifters. The sight almost makes me do a double take, because my immediate thought is that it's two of my men fighting each other. I'm so used to the three of them being the only feral shifters in existence. But despite the fact that Frost's sparring partner looks a lot like him, I also recognize that he's unfamiliar. One of the new ones. The ones Felicity warned us about.

I spare a brief thought for Frost's mental state. What if fighting like this and being in his shadow form undoes whatever Felicity did to fix him and sends him right back into the shadows? But for now, he seems stable and capable. As I pass, he rips out the other shifter's throat with an arc of gristle and gore from his sharp, giant teeth.

Nearby, one of Quinton's wolves has pinned one of our allies to the ground. She's bucking like a wild horse, but he's much larger and his weight is immovable from her prone position. I lower my head, speed up, and then slam into his side so hard that I feel his ribs crack beneath my skull. He yips, flying off into the grass.

The red-furred Silver Crest wolf leaps back to her feet and shouts, *Look*

out!

I turn, but not fast enough. Teeth clamp onto my throat, and I'm dragged straight to the dirt, slamming painfully onto my spine. There's no room for me to defend myself, not even a second's worth of time before the enemy wolf latches on to my throat.

I'm going to die.

Holy shit.

Death is always a possibility for a shifter. Rival packs, dangerous predators, unforgiving landscapes... at some point, we're all going to die. But it's such an abstract thought. You can come to terms with the idea of death. You can promise yourself that when the time comes, you'll be okay.

In this flash of a second, though, I'm devastated by the idea that I won't get to spend the rest of my life with Kian, Malix, and Frost.

Then four giant black paws slam into the dirt next to my head, and the ground shakes beneath me. Kian shoves the Blood Moon wolf off me with a massive swipe, and the wolf takes a chunk of my skin with him. Enough to hurt, but not enough to do irreversible damage.

I'm still on my back, blood trickling softly through my fur. Kian stares down at me with eyes that, in his shadow wolf form, glow faintly like blue fire from the inside. Our gazes hold for several loaded seconds, and I swear I can sense through our bond his fear at seeing me in trouble.

Then he lopes away, throwing himself back into the battle.

I clamber to my paws and prepare to do the same. Everything around me is chaos, wolf fighting wolf, the air filled with the sounds of snarling and growling and pained cries. Everyone is wrapped up in their own battle, fighting to get out of the conflict alive.

As I swing my head from side to side, searching out another enemy, my gaze lands on a familiar salt and pepper wolf facing off against another large wolf.

Felicity.

And... Quinton.

My heart drops into my stomach. She's completely alone, all of her other pack members either downed or preoccupied with fighting off Quinton's men. Felicity is no wilting violet, but Quinton is twice her size and made of rock-hard muscle. The two of them bare their teeth, growling and snarling as they circle each other, hackles raised.

She didn't come here to fight today. She didn't come here prepared to go

up against her ex. But clearly, she doesn't have a choice now.

In the space of a single heartbeat, the tension between them snaps, and Quinton lunges.

The two of them slam together, both of their bodies whirling from the brutality of their speed. They go down in a heap of limbs and fur, but Felicity comes out on top and latches on to Quinton's head with her teeth. Even with the fighting happening all around me, their snarls are the loudest as Felicity claws at his eyes with one paw, shaking her head viciously.

Quinton comes up off the ground like a mountain bursting forth from the earth. He gives a single shake of his big head and sends Felicity flying off to one side as if she's nothing more than a flea.

My breath catches in my throat.

Fuck. I have to help her.

Leaping into a sprint, I dodge a fighting duo of shifters, then leap over a fallen wolf, my sights set on the two alphas.

But before I can reach them, a wolf comes out of nowhere, blindsiding me. I don't know if he's purposefully keeping me from reaching Felicity, or if he just saw my distraction and used it to his advantage, but he rams my left hip with the full weight of his body. I spin around, the world blurring around me as I go down and roll from the momentum of the blow. Luckily, he hit my rear, not my head, so I manage to keep my wits about me and pop back up onto my feet.

He charges me again—clearly a man of few fighting strategies.

I whip around in a circle, throwing my body weight behind my headbutt. My skull connects with Quinton's minion with a dull *thwack*, and he goes boneless, out cold before he even hits the ground.

Unfortunately for me, the close quarters of his attack didn't give me the right angle to use proper technique. My stomach lurches from the pain radiating through my head, and I stumble several steps to the side before I'm able to right myself.

While I'm fighting down the dizziness and agony in my skull, Quinton clamps his jaws around one of Felicity's back legs. He tears her leg out from underneath her, making her whole body flip through the air. I hear the sound of her leg snapping like a gunshot over the din of the battle. She yelps and hits the ground, where she flops pitifully, unable to move her broken leg.

No! I shake my head and try to get back to my feet. She's too far away from the rest of the fight for anyone to help—I have to get to her. But my

head swims furiously, and when I try to stand, I lurch sideways.

Quinton shuffles up to her, whining, his wolf clearly agitated at having injured his mate. He snuffles at her head and ears, and Felicity falls still. The two of them look into each other's eyes, unspoken words passing between them. A sad, scared whine peals from Felicity's throat, and Quinton nuzzles her cheek with his.

Is he... trying to soothe her? Apologize? The possibility that there's still some humanity left in him floors me.

But then he draws back and snaps his jaws around her neck.

Felicity's spine breaks instantly between his powerful jaws. Horrified, I can practically feel the bones breaking in my own body, feel the bite tearing through my own neck. A whining gurgle leaves her, an awful death cry, and her body jerks as blood seeps from the corner of her mouth.

Quinton opens his jaws and lets her limp body slump to the ground. Her blood paints his muzzle, and there's a cold hardness in his eyes that sends nausea welling up inside me.

I'm frozen to the ground, half sitting, half lying, stunned by the sight before me. He killed his own mate. I thought for a moment that he wouldn't. That the bond between them would be stronger than his greed.

But it wasn't.

Maybe it never was.

F R O S T

THE SHADOWS IN ME STIR.

Agitated. Excited.

Enthused by the feel of another spine cracking between my teeth.

As the shifter I was fighting dies, I can feel his heart stop against my tongue. I know this man. Quite frankly, I didn't like him when I lived amongst this pack, and now, I hate him. He stands for something I can no longer accept, just another blind follower to an undeserving alpha. His death means nothing to me. One fewer wolf that can hurt us.

Then something shifts in the air. My shadows notice the sudden absence of sound.

Silence falls over the valley, and in the abrupt, muted hush, all movement ceases.

I drop the limp wolf shifter to the ground, and the shadows raging through me celebrate the meaty *thwack* of his useless body falling. Raising my head, I sniff the air for the source of discontent. For whatever has happened to pause the entire battle.

Amora isn't far from me. She's slumped over on her side and holding herself up by only her front paws, clearly injured but conscious. Her attention is riveted on something ahead of her. I follow her line of sight to see Quinton standing over a still form.

I recognize who it is in the moment before the mourning cry arises.

One long, mournful howl splits the funereal silence. One by one, more howls emerge, and a static of chatter begins in mind speak.

The alpha has fallen.

No. No!

Felicity is dead.

He's killed her. Oh God, he's killed her.

Then another, firmer voice. Cormac. *Retreat! Retreat now!*

It's the smart move. We're vastly outnumbered, even with myself and my brothers as allies of the Silver Crest pack. Quinton's new generation of feral shifters outnumbers even us, unfortunately. Not to mention, when an alpha falls, their pack often falls apart. The smartest thing to do at this point is to flee and regroup.

From the corner of my eye, I notice movement near where I last saw Amora. Thinking she might need help getting up, I turn to cross to her, and find she isn't the source of the movement. One of Quinton's shadow wolves is stalking her. Quietly. Unseen. Unheard.

No.

I launch across the rocky ground, racing at top speed to reach her before the foe does. He sees me coming and reroutes, snarling with spittle hanging from his sharp teeth, his sights set on me now.

We slam into one another behind Amora as the howls continue to spill into the night sky.

The rival shadow shifter hits the ground, and I land on top of him. He snarls and snaps onto my leg, but the angle I have on him gives me easy access to his ears. I bite his lobe and tear it from his body, swallowing it whole. The wolf yelps and bucks beneath me, releasing my leg, but he can't shake me.

I have more shadows than he does.

More power.

More rage.

I dispatch him quickly, then untangle myself from his lifeless limbs. Latching onto Amora's scruff, I lift her to a standing position, wait until she finds her footing, then give her a shove. *Run.*

But Felicity...

Her voice cracks on the name. She glances back at the fallen alpha's body. Quinton has vanished, lost in the melee of running wolves as the battle resumes.

I can sense the turmoil of emotions inside her, even if I don't quite understand them. Amora only just met Felicity, so the shock and pain radiating through our bond makes no sense to me. Any death is unfortunate, but it makes no difference to us whether Felicity lives or dies. It almost feels

as if Amora is mourning the female.

However, I do want to try to understand these things. Amora feels things so strongly that sometimes, I think she could teach me. Help me do better.

Right now, however, isn't the time. Not with my shadows still shifting and screaming with bloodlust. I haven't lost control of them, but the possibility remains that I will.

We have to go. Now. I urge her forward with another shove.

I'm worried at first that Amora has been too grievously injured to run, but she proves me wrong. Whatever wounds she's suffered, they're not bad enough to keep her down for long. Her footsteps are a bit unsteady at first, but they grow more even as we sprint through the valley behind the fleeing Silver Crest pack. Wolves move like wraiths in the growing moonlight, bodies darting, tails flying, paws like thunder on the ground.

Quinton's shifters pursue us, unwilling to let their advantage go so easily. I snarl and lash out at one that gets too close, taking him down with a kick to the jaw, then I tackle a second and leave his body rolling in the dirt. Kian and Malix do the same, taking care of the stragglers as we linger at the back edge of the pack. One by one, the enemy falls behind in the darkness, until they're gone.

Still, we run.

Once we settle into a steady pace—albeit a breakneck one—Kian draws up beside me. *Everybody okay?*

He uses that generic term, *everybody*, but his gaze seeks out mine. I appreciate his attempt to pretend he's not focused entirely on me, the shadow-filled monstrosity that I am.

Since I've been so carefully singled out, I reply, *I'm well.*

He gives me a sidelong glance, glowing eyes narrowing. *Are you lying to me?*

I haven't lost control, have I?

It's not a lie, although a more accurate truth might be to say I don't quite know what shape I'm in. The overabundance of shadows in me feels like a riot of darkness raging through my veins. They thrash beneath my skin, begging for more destruction, but I've managed to contain them, much better than I did in the moments after Quinton forced them into me. The fighting, the blood, the other newly made feral shifters... everything that just happened did leave me struggling to maintain my composure.

But I did. And I have. Surely that means something.

Kian's narrowed gaze tells me he doesn't quite believe me. But instead of arguing, he glances past me, looking toward Amora. *What about you?*

She doesn't respond. She doesn't even react as if she recognizes that he's speaking to her.

From her other side, Malix speaks up. *Kitty? You gonna make it?*

Broken from her reverie by Malix's nickname, Amora shakes her head and falters in her running for only a moment before she replies, *Fine. I'm fine.*

Kian doesn't accuse her of lying the way he did me, which is ironic, given that I know very well she's being untruthful. I can sense her agitation through our bond almost as strongly as I can feel the shadows beneath my own skin. She's raw. Unsettled.

But sprinting at breakneck speed away from the site of a tragedy isn't the right time to demand an explanation.

We barely stop to rest on the journey back to Wyoming. With Felicity dead, the Silver Crest pack is vulnerable, so it's imperative that we reach their pack lands before Quinton can. While we aren't certain he *will* attack, it's safe to assume he's already planning revenge for what just happened in his village. Even though our mission failed, he lost shifters in the battle, and he may even suspect that we were trying to steal his stone. We need to be ready if—or when—he comes after us.

So we travel quickly, digging deep into our energy reserves to race headlong across state lines. Micro-naps and brief pauses to eat or drink are the only breaks we allow, and surprisingly, nobody falls behind. I assume the weaker shifters are still running on pure adrenaline.

Most of the adrenaline has faded by the time we cross the state line into Wyoming, but it doesn't matter. We keep pushing anyway.

When we finally reach the Silver Crest pack's boundaries two days later, a heavy feeling falls over the group. Felicity's shifters slow, as if dreading to bring the news of her death to those left back home.

Many of the wolves limp or nurse wounds that have yet to fully heal, and it doesn't take more than a glance to understand every one of them is completely demoralized by what happened. It's late in the day, and although the last rays of the sun paint the buildings with a warm, glowing light, despair hangs around us like a weight in the air.

When pack members begin to emerge from their cabins to greet us, Cormac shifts to human form and takes the lead. He speaks softly to every

man or woman he passes, and I watch, fascinated, as each of them immediately strips their clothes and shifts. Like dominoes falling into place, they fall into line with the returning pack and begin to howl.

It's a repeat of the mourning howl that pierced the mountains back in Colorado, only this time, the entire pack joins in. Once the call begins, news of Felicity's death spreads swiftly, and the crowd of crying wolves around us grows as we walk through the middle of their camp.

The sound rises into the air, and I feel something raw and ragged inside me that I don't quite understand. As I watch the Silver Crest pack mourn their fallen leader, an ache spreads through my chest. The pain settles deep—not physical like a broken bone or gashed skin, but something more abstract.

Cormac leads us all to the amphitheater where Felicity secured our alliance, and everyone begins to file onto the stone benches. Some remain in their wolf forms, while a few shift back to human form. I notice a few wary glances cast our way, since Kian, Malix, and I are still in our shadow wolf shapes, and I nudge Kian before letting the shadows sink back into me. My brothers follow suit, and Amora shifts to human form too.

Her expression is drawn, her skin paler than usual. I place my fingertips at her lower back and guide her to a bench near the front of the theater. She casts me a thankful gaze and leans into my touch ever so slightly before taking a seat between myself and Malix.

Cormac sits at the edge of the raised stage and looks out grimly over the crowd. Several of his closest comrades sit around him, all of them wearing identical expressions of horror and devastation. The ginger-haired man doesn't need to call for silence. When the howls stopped, so did all conversation. Only the soft brush of wind across the rocks and the sharp, piercing call of a hawk can be heard somewhere close by but unseen.

Cormac visibly chews on the inside of his cheek as he surveys the silent, grieving pack. Finally, he speaks.

"As you've discovered by now, Felicity, our fearless alpha, has fallen in battle. She fought courageously and will forever be remembered as the shining light upon which the Silver Crest pack began."

A low murmur arises over the stands, punctuated by a few sobs and sniffles.

What would it be like to be loved so thoroughly? To be grieved by so many? My entire existence, for the most part, I've only had Malix and Kian. Only ever expected them to even care if something were to happen to me.

This is a testament to Felicity's legacy.

"Another four of our number did not return with us," Cormac says softly. "They, too, fell in battle. Upon arrival, my men notified the families of the four shifters and escorted them to the longhouse for the space to grieve."

The crowd rustles and shuffles, heads turning as if the wolves are trying to figure out who is missing.

"As Felicity's long time second in command, the mantle of alpha now automatically falls to me," Cormac goes on. "As is the custom, however, I open the floor for anyone who wishes to challenge me for the position."

The air and everything around us goes still except for Amora's hand, which snaps out and latches onto my knee. I can feel the tension in her body reaching a breaking point. I don't know if her reaction is specifically in regards to worry that there's about to be more violence or what, but I slide my hand over hers and interlace our fingers.

Several loaded moments pass, but nobody speaks up.

Cormac nods. "I truly appreciate your support, and I swear upon Felicity's memory that I will serve you faithfully and protect you as best I can from all threats, great and small."

The pack responds with a chorusing grunt that sounds a bit like a low bark. I assume it's some kind of supportive affirmation, but I don't have any history to go on. Felicity ran things differently here than Quinton did with our old pack.

"First order of business," Cormac goes on, his tone becoming more clipped and business like. "I want extra patrols on our border. Four wolves on patrol at all times, maintaining a once an hour rotation." He glances over his freckled shoulder. "Harley, can you handle coming up with a schedule and a roster for that?"

One of the men behind him nods.

Cormac turns back around and his green gaze flicks over the crowd. "Now, as for our magical defenses... Naomi... Naomi, where are you?"

Three rows back from us, a curvy, dark-haired girl not much older than Amora stands. "I'm here, alpha."

"Can you get in touch with your contacts in the nearby coven? We need stronger magical defenses."

She blanches. "I don't have the same ties to them that Felicity did."

"It's all right," Cormac assures her. "You went with her every time she visited them, so they know you and trust you. Tell them what happened, and

offer them whatever they want in return for sending some of their best witches out to reset our protections.”

Naomi nods. “Yes, alpha.”

“Quinton may be coming,” Cormac says, his voice rising as he addresses the crowd as a whole. “We cannot know when he’ll arrive or how long we’ll have to prepare for that eventuality. Coming up with a new plan to fight him off—for good, this time—is our main priority. We will avenge Felicity’s death by finally destroying his evil once and for all.”

Several shifters in the crowd behind us let out savage whoops, and Cormac smiles grimly at the sound, although there’s an undercurrent of sadness in his expression.

A good second in command—a *true* partner—never wants to become alpha, because that means they lose their closest friend and confidante.

As the battle cry dies away, Cormac speaks again. “Those of you who were a part of the mission and the attack, you’re dismissed for the evening. Return to your homes and rest so that you may awaken sharp and refreshed tomorrow.” He glances toward my brothers, Amora, and me. “You four as well. You can stay in the same cabin as before. We’ll meet early in the morning to discuss our next moves.”

With that directive, all of the shifters involved in the mission to Blood Moon lands leave the meeting. We file from the amphitheater, a quiet, visibly exhausted lot.

It’s cooler away from the crowd, and the sun has dropped beyond the horizon, setting the purple sky ablaze with stars. I’m more comfortable away from so many bodies, alone with only my brothers and my mate. The farther we walk from the theater, the more the shadows settle inside me. Relief runs through me like cool water, chasing away the lingering tension from my constant fight to keep my shadows at bay.

Then I glance at Amora, and my relief dies.

She looks haunted, more so even than she’s looked ever since the night of the battle. Her abnormal silence hasn’t gone unnoticed, either, although it isn’t as if we weren’t all tongue-tied after what happened. Still, it’s obvious she’s bothered. Sad, upset, depressed, worried... any amalgamation of emotions I can’t quite read in her.

What I *can* read, however, is that the thing bothering her is rooted in much more than Felicity’s death or the botched mission. It’s something bigger than that.

Malix interrupts my thoughts, making a noise in his throat. “Uh. Anyone remember where our cabin is?”

Kian grunts and looks around, halting in his bare feet on the dusty path. “Shit.”

I consider rolling my eyes but it seems like too much work. “Follow me.”

The cabin is dark when we arrive, but the door is unlocked and the main room smells of a citrusy cleaner that reminds me of Amora. Someone has left us clean towels and blankets, and the closet has been restocked with new hand-me-downs.

Amora brushes past me, clearly lost in thought. I follow, intending to reach for her and ask her what’s wrong. Ask her to talk to me. Talk to us.

But before I can reach her, she strides straight to the bathroom door and disappears inside.

The lock clicks firmly into place.

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AMORA

HEAT RISES in my eyes as I flip the water on in the shower and climb inside. I don't even wait for the water to warm, and the shock of cold zings through me, giving me a rush of adrenaline to chase away the sheer exhaustion that's settled over my bones. The cold quickly fades, replaced by lukewarm water. Another twist of the pipes gives me the scalding temperature I need to ease the emotional turmoil I feel.

Weeks of grime slosh off my body beneath the shower head while my tears disappear into the water on my face. I dump shampoo on my hair and scrub vigorously with my fingernails, scratching harder than necessary. If I focus on the little pinpricks of pain, maybe I can get the sight of Quinton standing over Felicity's body out of my head.

If only for a moment.

His mate.

His mate.

How could he do that?

I turn, ducking my head under the water to rinse out the suds. I grab the bar of soap off the ledge beside me and lather my hands, then use my nails again to scrub at my face.

How could I have—

The doorknob rattles, startling me from my dark thoughts.

My heart lurches until I remember I locked it. I needed my solitude. I needed Frost to stop looking at me like he wanted to dissect every thought in my head.

Safe in the knowledge they can't get in, I turn my face up toward the spray of water to rinse the last of the soap away. As I'm reaching for the

conditioner, a loud bang echoes through the bathroom. There's a metallic ping as part of the locking mechanism falls to the floor.

Then the shower curtain is flung open.

All three men loom on the other side of the tub. It's a lot of damn shifter in one place. They take up every molecule of air and space and damn near block out the dull glow of the over-sink light. All three of them stare at me with varying levels of concern.

"Excuse you!" I snap, grabbing the curtain and yanking it closed.

Bad move. This time, Kian yanks it right off the rod.

I screech my indignation as all three of them stare at me again, and this time, there's nothing to pull closed to block them out. The curtain dangles from Kian's fingers, water dripping off it onto the bathroom rug.

Frost, who's remained remarkably stoic this whole time, speaks. "You're upset."

"Of course I am," I snap. "I'm trying to take a damn shower, and I just wanted a minute to myself."

"No. Not this situation. Not this moment," Frost says softly. "Before. Ever since we left Colorado."

My heart thumps against my rib cage. Scalding water continues to pour down my body, grounding me, reminding me that I'm here. I'm alive. And so are they.

I don't want to say it. I don't want to put into words the turn my thoughts have taken since I watched the life fade from Felicity's eyes. Watched her mate so callously destroy her.

"You're right. I'm upset," I say carefully, keeping my emotions squashed as far down as I can get them. "We led this pack into danger. Now their entire world has changed because their alpha is dead. I hate that they're suffering. That they're mourning."

Frost shakes his head. "It's more than that."

I swallow hard, glancing between them. "What more could there be?"

Malix leans into the shower and turns off the water. The ensuing silence is heavy, despite the drain gurgling and the shower head dripping. "Come on, kitty. We know something is up. We can feel your emotions."

Kian adds, "And hear your heart beating. Too fast."

"Fuck. I hate you all," I growl, reaching past Frost for the towel on the rack. I step over the edge of the tub, wrapping the towel around me, but I have no room to maneuver. They don't budge, the three of them forming a

wall, barring me from leaving the room.

“You’re haunted,” Frost says simply. “Talk to us. Maybe it will ease your mind.”

But I can’t. Putting my deepest, darkest thoughts out into the universe feels like it would do the opposite of easing my mind.

Then Kian says my name in the gentlest voice I’ve ever heard from him.
“Amora.”

Just one word. Just my name falling from his lips, from the man who ruined me more than three years ago and then barreled back into my life, upending everything. I stare at him, at all three of them, my heart pounding so hard it hurts and my chest so constricted it feels like my lungs are caught in a vise. Emotions build like a tsunami inside me, swelling and crashing against my ribs. Everything that’s been churning inside me for days is finally bubbling up, ready to explode.

“I was going to kill you!” I burst out.

The three of them exchange confused glances.

“Just like Quinton killed Felicity,” I add, my voice cracking. More hot tears sting my eyes. “I was going to kill you. I watched him kill her during the battle, and I realized that could have been us. That could have been *us* killing each other.”

Frost reaches out to brush my still wet hair over my shoulder. “It was not, however. We’re safe.”

“Are we?” I ask, tears clogging my voice. “Because I don’t want that. I don’t want to see that happen to us. I don’t want to work against my mates—it feels like working against my own heart, and that would kill me. I want to love you.” I glance between the three of them, trying to show them with my eyes just how much I mean this. The words are spilling from me now, a torrent of truths that I’ve been holding back for far too long. “I want to love you and I want to be loved by you. I want us to trust one another. To have each other’s backs no matter what happens.”

I pause to take a breath. The more I speak, the more and more I’m getting worked up. The more my pulse races and my wet skin grows chilled. Rivulets of water trace cold trails down my bare shoulders and arms, and the towel is soaked against my body.

“If the witches who warned us had their way, it would be one of us standing over the other’s body,” I go on, clutching the towel tighter to my chest. “Prophecies are supposed to be fact. Undeniable. Unbreakable. But

fuck that!"

I raise my voice on the last words, and in response, Kian raises an eyebrow and Malix's lips quirk into a tiny smile.

"Fuck prophecies," I repeat as I swipe at the tears threatening to crest over my eyelashes. "I make my own fate. We'll make our own fate. Together. And it won't end in murder. Got it?" I jam my finger into Kian's chest and cut a glare toward Frost. "We aren't going to go down like that. Not like them. I couldn't stand it. I can't even stand the thought of... of hurting you or killing you. Jesus. I can't believe I ever tried—"

Suddenly, Frost's arm snakes out and hooks around my waist. He yanks me to him, my arms crushed between us as my fingers still cling to my towel, and his lips cover mine, cutting off my rant.

There's a salty, spicy taste to his skin, and when his lips part in that tentative way of his, I'm surrounded by the familiar scent of his body. Warmth unfurls in my belly, heating my skin, and I tilt my face up to his, opening to his kiss.

It's soft at first, but then he catches my face in his hands and deepens the kiss, his tongue sliding against mine with deliberate possession. I lose hold of the towel and dig my fingernails into his shoulders, clinging to him, letting the heat of his skin surround me. All my worries seem unnecessary in his arms, with his mouth devouring mine.

By the time he breaks away, I'm breathless, barely standing on my own accord.

Frost presses his forehead to mine, and I realize he's breathing just as hard as I am.

"I promise you, I will never hurt you," he murmurs. "I will always take care of you. I... *need* you, Amora. More than I can express."

For him, those few short sentences are what counts as a monologue. I stare up at his serious face, and there's something I've never seen before in his icy blue eyes. Something that looks a little like love.

He smiles at me, and it's such an uncommon gesture that my heart squeezes in my chest. I go on tiptoe to kiss him again, tangling my fingers in his pale, silken hair.

Another strong hand grasps my bicep, and suddenly I'm being swept right out of Frost's grasp and into Malix's embrace.

He locks an arm around me, pinning me in place against his hard torso as he drops his head until our noses touch. "We're a team. A partnership. A

pack.”

He puts emphasis on the last bit, his lips brushing mine ever so gently with every word. He sounds so much more serious than his usual flirty teasing, but then his lips curl as he adds, “I like this cuddly side of you, kitty. But keep the claws too. They keep me on my toes.”

A chuckle bursts out of me, and he captures the sound with his kiss.

Malix’s kiss is anything but tentative. He fists a handful of my bare ass and yanks me against his hips. As his tongue swirls with mine in a devastatingly arousing way, I can feel his cock start to stiffen against my lower belly. A pulse of answering desire flares low in my body, and I let out a little moan, rubbing against him like I’m in heat.

He makes a sound that’s half groan and half laugh, grinding back against me for a second before he gently grips my shoulders and spins me around to face Kian.

My heartbeat seizes in my chest as I meet those beautiful gold-ringed eyes.

I can’t read anything in Kian’s expression. I’m too suffocated by my own emotions to try to muddle through our bond and get a sense for what’s going on inside him.

This feels big. A make or break moment. I know where I stand with Frost, whose fingers are resting possessively on my hip. I know where I stand with Malix, who has yet to release my shoulders. His palms are slippery on the remnants of water dampening my skin.

But Kian?

Some part of me still isn’t sure.

Some part of me wonders if we’ll ever be able to overcome all the bad blood of our past.

My heart thuds and my stomach turns over as I stare at him, waiting for him to destroy me. To wreck me with some unfeeling word. I offered my heart up to him three years ago and learned what it felt like to have it broken. No, not just broken—ripped from my chest, set on fire, and left to burn to ash.

And here I am, offering it up to him yet again.

Please don’t hurt me.

I don’t say the words out loud, but I *feel* them all the way down to the depths of my soul.

And maybe he can feel them too, because in that same instant, he moves.

Kian hauls me into his arms and kisses me fiercely, almost painfully. His teeth scrape my lower lip and he demands entrance to my mouth, claiming me, digging his fingers into my bare sides. Within seconds, I'm panting, desire a living, breathing thing as his hands roam my skin and his mouth devours all the sense in my body.

He pulls back just long enough to look into my eyes and growl one word, low and guttural.

"Mine."

The sound of his voice shocks me and sends a wave of relief crashing over me, an emotion so strong it steals my breath away.

I handed him my heart, and he didn't crush it.

Instead, he... claimed it.

As I struggle to get my breath back, Frost leans closer on my right side, his teeth nipping at my ear, and Malix brushes my wet hair away from my neck, pressing his lips to my damp skin.

Energy seems to swirl between us like we're attached by invisible threads. Desire and affection build between us, too, overwhelming in their intensity. I'm surrounded by the three of them. I can feel the heat from them, smell their skin, sense their need like a hunger in my own gut.

For a second, my gaze remains locked with Kian's. Then he slides his fingers up my jaw, digs them into my hair, and yanks me closer into another toe-curling kiss.

I let out a soft moan against his lips as I let myself drown in his kiss. All the while, Malix and Frost stay right by me, their mouths and hands never leaving my skin. When fingertips tug at my chin, I follow the gentle pressure willingly, breaking away from Kian to kiss Malix instead.

Kian doesn't seem angry at his brother pulling him away from me. Instead, he picks up right where Malix left off, dragging his lips over my neck in a continuation of the trail Malix was mapping out a moment ago.

Goosebumps spread over my skin, my nipples hardening at the feel of all three of my mates touching me. It's almost more than I can stand, and I feel like I'm burning up from the inside as I break away from Malix's kiss to find Frost's hungry, waiting lips.

I don't want to stop doing what we're doing, and I'm a little afraid that if I interrupt the moment, I'll break the spell. But this bathroom really isn't made for four occupants, and it's definitely not made for any of the things I'm craving right now. Frost and I managed to fuck in here, but that was just

two of us. With four bodies in the cramped space, it would be next to impossible.

As Frost's lips leave mine to trail over my jawline, I tilt my head back a little, trying to gather the mental strength to speak coherently.

"Bedroom," I gasp out.

At that single word, all three men pause what they're doing and draw back, each of them looking at me with heated eyes. Then Kian moves like lightning, smooth and graceful as the predator he is.

He swoops me up in his arms, tossing me over his shoulder like I weigh nothing. I let out a little *oof* of surprise as he shoves open the broken bathroom door and carries me toward the bedroom. Malix's deep chuckle sounds from behind us as he and Frost follow close in our wake.

"Such a fucking caveman," I hear him murmur, and I swear I hear Frost laugh softly too.

A giddy grin tugs at my lips, but it slips away when we enter the bedroom and Kian tosses me down on the bed. I land with a little bounce, and heat flares inside me as I look at all three of my men standing at the foot of the bed. None of us have dressed since we got back to the cabin, so their naked forms are on full display, their cocks hard and their muscled bodies covered with the dark marks that make them look dangerous and beautiful.

I start to move, about to go up onto my knees and reach for them, but Kian's voice cuts through the quiet of the room.

"Don't move."

I hesitate, obeying his command even as my eyes narrow a little. He's so fucking bossy, although I'd be lying if I said I hate the way he gets all dominant and commanding in bed.

"Why?" I ask, unable to stop myself from pushing his buttons a little even in this moment.

His gold-rimmed eyes gleam darkly, as if he knows exactly what I'm doing—trying to get a rise out of him. But the heated possessiveness never wavers in his expression as he gives me an answer.

"Because I want to look at you. I want my brothers to see what's theirs. What's ours."

Oh.

Oh *fuck*.

I didn't expect his answer to turn me on so much, but after everything that just happened between us in the bathroom, every word he just spoke is loaded

with meaning.

So I don't push back against his order, staying still just like he told me to and allowing the three men to stare down at me. Frost reaches down to grip his cock, and I wonder if he's squeezing himself to get a little relief or to try to get his arousal under control. Maybe a bit of both.

That thought makes me whimper softly, and although I make no move to reach for the feral shifters, I can't resist reaching down to slide one hand between my legs.

"Shit, kitty," Malix chokes out as I use my fingertips to spread my pussy lips, giving them all an even clearer view of just how wet I am for them already.

"Beautiful," Frost murmurs, his throat moving as he swallows.

"Perfect," Kian echoes, pride and desire echoing in his voice. Then the commanding tone returns as he adds, "Keep going. Touch yourself."

Malix fists his cock the same way Frost is, stroking himself lightly as they watch me dip two fingers into my pussy. I stare at each of them, absorbing everything about the way they look in this moment as I drag my fingers out and begin to circle my clit.

I've always been in touch with my body enough to be able to get myself off very easily. I could push myself over the edge in a few minutes flat, but for some reason... I don't.

My legs move restlessly over the blankets on the bed, my back arching a little as soft noises spill from my lips, but every time I get close to coming, I back off a bit, switching up the tempo of my fingers and keeping myself from falling over the edge.

Kian watches with glittering eyes, his own hand wrapping around his cock as his brothers stroke themselves on either side of him. He catches my gaze, his nostrils flaring. "You're waiting for us, aren't you?"

I nod, my heart beating too hard for me to speak.

"Good girl."

With those growled words of praise, all three men suddenly move. They crawl up onto the bed with me, and as if his self-control has already been pushed to the breaking point, Frost is the one who settles between my legs first. He hooks me under the knees and drags me closer, then fists his cock and lines it up with my entrance.

His blue eyes find mine, a question burning in their depths as he hesitates for a fraction of a second.

"Yes," I breathe, arching up to meet him, feeling the tip of his cock stretch my entrance. "Fuck me, Frost. Please. I'm yours."

The last word is barely out of my mouth before his hips pitch forward, and he presses into me with a deep groan. I moan as I reach up to clutch at his shoulders, and Malix and Kian run their lips over my arms and neck as Frost begins to move.

I'm learning his body, just like he's learning mine, and although there's a fierce desperation to the way he drives into me, there's something *comforting* about it too. Like he's coming home, and I'm welcoming him.

My clit is already throbbing from the way I played with myself earlier, and every time he bottoms out inside me, I clench around him, a new wave of pleasure surging through me. I'm so close, and although I waited for them to join me on the bed before I let myself come, I don't want to wait any more.

I can finish more than once, and more than *anything*, I want to come with each of these men inside me.

"God," I breathe, nipping at Frost's lip as he drops his head to kiss me. "You feel so fucking good."

"So do you," he responds roughly. Then, as if remembering our time in the shower together, he murmurs, "What do you want?"

Emotions expand in my chest at the earnestness of his question. I know, without any doubt, that Frost will always try to give me what I want. He'll always want to please me, always want to see me happy.

"My clit," I whisper, pressing more soft kisses to his lips as Malix slides a hand between us to play with my nipple. "Touch my clit. Please."

Heat flares in Frost's eyes, burning like white-hot flame. Immediately, he slides a hand between us and finds my clit, pressing against it in a circular pattern as his strokes slow a little, becoming so hard and deep that I feel them everywhere.

"That's it," I groan. "Oh fuck. Yes. Yes!"

The orgasm bursts through me like a bomb, splintering me into pieces and making me dig my nails into Frost's shoulders. Not that he seems to mind. With his fingers still working my clit, he pounds into me, and even when he throws his head back on a groan, emptying himself, his hand never stops.

I laugh breathlessly as another climax hits me like an aftershock of the first, finally reaching down to drag his hand away from my pulsing clit. I kiss his fingertips, staring up at him as I try to memorize every detail of the way he looks right now.

“You’re beautiful,” Frost murmurs, stealing the words right out of my mouth.

“You are too,” I whisper back.

He looks almost bashful, a faint tinge of pink coloring his tan cheeks, but he grins down at me, looking more boyish than I’ve ever seen him.

When he pulls out and shifts to one side of me, Malix takes his place, catching my gaze with a hungry, teasing grin. “You ready for more, kitty?”

“Of you three?” I tease back, relieved to finally not have to hide the truth. “Always.”

His violet eyes gleam brighter, and he drops his head to lap at my nipple. “Good answer.”

It’s the only answer there will ever be, but I don’t get a chance to say that, because before I can open my mouth again, he’s fitting his cock at my entrance and sliding inside.

I’m slick with my own arousal and Frost’s release, but if Malix has any qualms about fucking his brother’s cum into me, he doesn’t show it. He just pulls out and slides in again, bracing himself on his hands so that he can look down at me.

Kian and Frost make low noises on either side of us, soft grunts of approval and arousal as they watch Malix and me rock on the bed as he thrusts at a steady, even pace.

“Wanted to do this from the first fucking moment I saw you,” he murmurs, his face uncharacteristically serious as pleasure begins to build between us like lightning gathering in a storm cloud.

“What? Fuck me in front of your brothers?” I shoot back teasingly.

“Yes.”

His response is immediate, and it strikes me that even though Malix likes to joke around, he’s not kidding about this.

He’s saying what I still don’t quite have the guts to yet—that he’s wanted this for a long, long time. That despite everything, despite all the bad that’s tainted things between us, the thread of the connection between us is long and unbroken, stretching all the way back to the moment we met.

My heart throbs in my chest, an ache that only heightens the pleasure pulsing through my clit as he grinds his hips against mine. Finally, he drapes his body over mine, resting on his forearms as he finds my lips in a fierce kiss. Frost and Kian stay close, backing off enough to make room for him but always touching me somehow, hands or lips or teeth trailing over my skin.

I close my eyes, wrapping my legs around Malix as pleasure radiates out from my core, spreading to the very tips of my fingers.

“I’m gonna come,” I whisper into his ear, biting his lobe gently and making him growl. “I can’t stop myself, Malix. You feel too good.”

“Fuck yes.” He pulls back and slides in again, his body shuddering slightly. “Come for me, kitty.”

Pressing my face into the crook of his shoulder, I cling to him and let go. Another orgasm rockets through me, making my thighs clench around his lean, muscled hips. He picks up his pace, driving into me in hard thrusts before following me over the edge.

The room goes quiet for a long moment as we catch our breath. I can still feel Kian and Frost on either side of us, but their movements slow too, all of us taking a moment to adjust to this new milestone in our relationship. I know we’re not done yet, but no one seems in any hurry to speed this up.

I know I’m not. I wish I could make this moment stretch on forever.

Because in this moment, Quinton might as well not even exist.

In this moment, it’s just me and my men.

Finally, Malix lifts his head and drops a kiss to the tip of my nose. “God, I love fucking you,” he murmurs.

“Good.” I chuckle. “Because I’ve got lots of plans for more of this.”

He waggles his eyebrows. “Dirty girl. You really *are* my fated mate.”

I breathe out another laugh at the idea that my dirty mind is the true proof that we’re a fated match, shaking my head and grinning at him as he draws back, his cock sliding out of me.

Frost, Malix, and I all look toward Kian next.

The final piece of the puzzle. My third mate.

He’s kneeling on the bed beside me, and when I reach for him, he comes willingly. He settles between my legs, his cock hard and thick. But he doesn’t slide into me right away. Instead, he trails one hand down my stomach, and all four of us watch the path of his fingers as they move lower and lower. When he reaches my pussy, he dips two fingers inside. I moan at the feeling, and heat flashes in his eyes.

“You look so stunning like this,” he murmurs in a low voice. “Fucked by my brothers. Marked and claimed and flushed. Gorgeous.”

I lick my lips, not answering, but keeping my attention fixed on his hand. He drags his fingers out of me, coated with my slick arousal and the other two men’s cum. The sight is so beautifully filthy that I let out a soft, plaintive

noise.

Kian's lips curve upward in a possessive grin, and he brings his fingers up to my mouth, offering them to me. Holding his gaze, I wrap my lips around them, and Malix curses as I suck them. Frost makes a guttural noise, and when I look over at him, I see that he's hard again, stroking his cock as he watches me lick Kian's fingers clean.

"I'm glad you're hungry for us," Kian tells me, following my gaze toward his brother before looking back at me. "Because we'll always be hungry for you."

With those words, he pulls his hand away from my mouth and hooks his arms under my knees, lifting my ass off the bed a little as he nudges my entrance with his cock.

My core flutters around him as he sinks into me, my body sated and exhausted but hungry just like he said.

I will always be hungry for these men. Always.

"Kian," I murmur, giving in to the simple pleasure of saying his name as he fucks me, letting my barriers down and experiencing the incredible pleasure of falling without fear of hitting the ground.

"I know, baby," he whispers roughly, setting a hard pace that lets me know his self-restraint is about as tapped out as Frost's was. "I know. Fuck."

Frost and Malix are both stroking themselves beside us, both so turned on by everything that's happening between all of us that they're hard again. The sounds of them touching themselves fill the air, a counterpoint to the slap of Kian's pelvis against mine as he fucks me into the bed.

Time seems to stand still for a long, suspended moment, and I try to cling to that feeling even as pleasure starts to build slow and steady inside me. I know Kian won't let himself come until I do, and I want to let go at the same moment he does.

"Look at me," I murmur, reaching up to frame his face with my hands. He groans, his lips pulling back in a grimace as his body tenses, but he does what I asked, holding my gaze as something passes between us.

I don't look away. I don't even blink. I just watch the pleasure spread over his face, and when it finally breaks, I let it break me too.

He growls, surging into me one more time as I throw my head back, my mouth dropping open on a cry.

Dimly, I'm aware of Frost and Malix grunting and cursing as they come too, but it all gets lost in a fog of sated desire as my body shudders and heart

slams against my ribs.

Kian collapses on top of me, his large frame covering mine as he buries his face in my neck. Malix and Frost move closer on either side, and I realize that my hip is sticky with someone's cum.

"So..." Malix drawls the word near my ear, his tone languid and heated. "It just occurred to me that this four-way mate situation is probably gonna be a little messy."

Kian huffs a short grunt, as if he's too tired to do anything else, and I can practically feel Frost's deadpan look. But I laugh, grinning up as I turn my head to look at my violet-eyed mate.

"Yeah," I admit. "It probably will."

The honest truth is, it was already messy.

For a long time, it was the ugly kind of messy. The kind that involved lies and manipulation, grudges and anger. The kind that almost broke us.

But maybe now it can become the *good* kind of messy. The sweaty, sticky, happy kind.

I don't voice the thought out loud, but as we disentangle ourselves and clean up a little before falling back into bed in an exhausted pile, I hold that hope close to my heart.

AMORA

I SURFACE from a dreamless sleep to the deep, dark of night, cocooned by the warmth of the three men sleeping around me.

I'm on my back, completely pinned in by them—something that, once upon a time, would have sent alarm bells clanging through my head. Instead, it's peaceful and comforting, if a little too warm.

The ceiling is barely visible in the blackness, small cracks in the paint standing out like spider webs made of ink. I take a couple of deep breaths, staring up at them as I try to figure out where I stand. How I feel.

The past few weeks still weigh on my shoulders, although I imagine that's not something that's just going to go away. Things still aren't good here. We lost against Quinton, and I'm not naïve enough to think he won't retaliate. Felicity is dead, and that's a pretty permanent problem that's going to throw her whole pack into a state of flux for a while.

On the other hand, for the first time in a while, *I'm* okay. Even if the external world is chaos, my internal world has found a tentative peace that sends relief straight through my bones.

It's out in the open now, how I feel about these men. No more hiding my emotions, no more pretending I wouldn't sacrifice everything to keep them safe. In a way, my admission of devotion to them makes me vulnerable, and that niggling thought buzzes at the back of my mind irritably. I did give them more power over me, after all.

The power to hurt me.

On the bright side, I'm not hurting *myself* by denying what I feel and what I want anymore. Kian, Malix, and Frost aren't like Quinton. I truly believe that. They were raised to be amoral, but they're not evil, which makes

it easier for me to reconcile my feelings for them.

I turn my head on the pillow and gaze at Kian's face in the dim light. He must be dreaming—his eyes move back and forth behind his lids. I wonder what he's seeing. Whether he's possibly dreaming of me.

Poor Felicity. I look back at the ceiling, my heart clenching. I know the way I've internalized her death at the hands of her mate has been almost illogical. But the whole way back from Blood Moon pack lands, I couldn't stop picturing Quinton kill her. That moment when he made the choice to destroy his mate.

I almost made that choice too. And that's what hurts so much.

Not only that, but Quinton and Felicity started off in love. Smitten. Two wolves meant for each other, happy to have found their fated match. Then all of those good things slid into chaos and destruction.

Me and my mates started off in the worst way possible. Between the hatred, the violence, and the betrayal—on all of our parts—it wasn't exactly the healthiest way to start a relationship. Especially one that's meant to be permanent and lasting.

But I have to hope that we'll keep moving toward something better. We've been through hell, but I have to believe that all the pain we've been through will lead to something good. All the bullshit will somehow just make our bond stronger in the end.

“You’re overthinking this already.”

The murmur of a deep voice near my left ear startles me out of my inner musings.

I turn my head to find Malix lying on his side, his violet eyes open, staring at me with an amused smirk on his full lips.

“I am not,” I shoot back, my voice hushed but haughty.

His smile widens. “You definitely are. I don’t need to be a witch to see straight into that kitty head.”

Rolling my eyes, I carefully shift onto my side to face him. “Just because you think you know everything doesn’t mean you do.”

“Nah. Frost’s the one who knows everything. I just know you.” He traces his fingers down my cheek, the touch warm and soothing.

I lean into his hand and close my eyes, enjoying this small gesture of comfort.

He speaks again, his voice still low. “This doesn’t have to be complicated. You and me. You and *us*. The four of us. In fact, it doesn’t

really *need* to be complicated at all. You're the only one stewing over it hard enough to make it into a mess.”

I open my eyes and stick my tongue out at him, going for maximum maturity.

Malix chuckles, brushing his thumb over my cheekbone as he studies me with eyes that gleam in the small bit of light coming through the window.

“Whether we have the mate bond or not, you fit with us. You realize that, right? Call it a mate bond, call it something else. Accept it, deny it... it doesn't matter. Because no matter what we do, we can't change the truth. We need you.” He leans in and presses a gentle kiss to the tip of my nose. “You fill a hole in our pack we didn't even know existed until we met you. You fit, even against our rough edges. You make us whole.”

I reel at his admission. His words hit me right in the chest, making my heart constrict painfully. Warm tears gather in my eyes, but I blink them away because I don't want to lose sight of his beautiful face.

He glances over my shoulder then and winks. Almost at the same time, Kian's warm arm slips gently around my bare waist and he hikes me closer against his body. His breath tickles my ear as he says, “Just let it happen. You. Us. Let it be.”

I realize he must have been awake for most of my whispered conversation with Malix. He squeezes me against him while Frost's sleep-tousled head pops up from behind Malix's shoulder.

Frost catches my gaze with his cool, icy blue eyes and we stay like that for several long seconds in a kind of unspoken conversation. I can sense pure affection and a sincere promise on the other end of our bond.

I revel in this moment, as terrifying as it is. I think of that morning three years ago when I woke up to find Kian gone, rising from bed in that hotel room only to realize that my mate had left me. *Rejected* me. After that day, I fought hard to protect my heart from anyone and anything who might break it again.

Now... I let go of that need for protection. I allow myself to be vulnerable by trusting them, by believing that they care for me.

When the silence drags on just a shade too long, Kian leans down and nips at the sensitive skin of my neck, then his lips close over my pulse. His tongue traces over my flesh, warm and wet, as he sucks gently.

I gasp and arch against him, my eyes closing as a bolt of pure sensation shoots through me, starting at my neck and traveling through my entire body.

When I open my eyes again, Malix's smile has faded away, replaced by pure desire. He closes the space between us and kisses me, one hand sliding up to cup my breast, and I arch against his palm, moaning as his thumb brushes over my nipple and awakens every nerve in my body. Kian's cock is hardening against my ass, and as he continues to trail his tongue over my skin, one hand dips over my hip and slides toward the aching spot between my legs. I open to him and break the kiss with Malix, reaching past him for Frost.

Frost captures my lips over Malix, but we've barely managed to taste each other when a howl goes up in the distance.

My eyes fly wide open.

We break apart, and all three of the bodies surrounding me go rigid.

"Is that... a warning?" I ask, my skin prickling uneasily.

"No." Kian's voice is grave, all the smooth warmth from a moment ago gone. "Not a warning. A howl of pain."

Frost's blue eyes flash as he catches his brother's gaze. "And it's coming from the pack land's border."

AMORA

FUCK. Not Quinton. Please, don't let it be Quinton. We're not fucking ready.

I'm not sure who moves first, but within seconds of the piercing howl outside, the four of us are racing across the dark, silent cabin toward the front door.

Kian reaches the door first and flings it open, launching himself out into the night with Malix and Frost right behind him. As I come even with the door and prepare to shift, I pause for a fraction of a second, mesmerized by the sight of them leaping from the small front stoop.

They trail black smoke as they shift, morphing like shadows. It's beautiful in a deadly sort of way, as if they're more than limbs and torsos and heads, but something more metaphysical. More fluid. A macabre dance of shadows.

Then they land on the dusty front lawn in full shadow wolf form and take off. I hurry to follow behind, letting my own shift take over my body in the split second after I leap off the porch stoop.

Another howl lights up the night, and I put on a burst of speed, although I'm still trailing behind the shadow shifters at this point, thanks to their superior speed. But we aren't the only ones racing to help whoever's in trouble. We're joined by many of the other Silver Crest wolves who appear like phantoms from the darkness and fall into pace with us. I don't know exactly what we're racing into, but we're coming in force.

After half a mile, figures emerge out of the darkness up ahead near the edge of the village protections. I know that several wolves are meant to be on duty patrolling the borders, but there are way more than four forms out there.

There are *dozens*.

The invading wolves fan out around a massive shadow wolf. At first glance, I can tell this wolf is much larger than any of my three mates, and the shadows roll off him like they've forgotten he has a physical form. He hunches over two fallen wolves, blood dripping from his black muzzle. As we approach, the giant shadow wolf raises his head and surveys the oncoming horde of Silver Crest wolves, plus myself and my mates, and I swear the stranger smiles.

I know it's Blood Moon pack wolves here to exact their revenge. What else could it be? But I have no idea who this giant shadow wolf on steroids is. Based on the wolfish sneer and dripping blood, I don't *want* to know him.

For a moment, I think Kian is going to maintain his speed and send us all crashing right into a fight without any instructions. But I sense confusion through the bond, and his steps falter just enough that everyone around him starts to slow.

The invading wolves go on alert, growling and snapping, inching forward as if ready to charge us, but the massive shadow wolf glances back over his shoulder, and suddenly, all of the wolves fall silent.

And wait.

We come to a halt several yards away, the rest of Felicity's wolves gathering around us. Cormac's ginger-furred wolf steps up next to Kian, baring his teeth, but even the new alpha seems to be waiting for Kian's call.

This close, I can see that while half the invading group is normal shifters, a nearly equal amount are shadow shifters. By default, they're stronger and faster than the rest of us.

Which means we are *vastly* outnumbered.

An odd, screaming silence fills the void between our two groups.

Then Kian's voice reaches out through mind speak, tinged with a hint of disgust. *Quinton?*

A sick feeling opens up in my stomach. That's... Quinton? That massive, vicious looking shadow wolf? Shock turns my paws numb. I stare at the overly large shadow shifter, trying to see hints of the alpha in this new beast. But the shadow form is so different from his normal wolf form that I can't recognize him.

My men do, though. All three of them bristle with tension.

Kian, the massive shadow shifter replies calmly. His eyes gleam a dangerous, otherworldly blue.

Kian scoffs. *Figured out how to fill yourself with shadows, then?*

Shadow Quinton paces to the side three steps, his head swinging. *I did. Unlike your useless brother, I had no issue swallowing the shadows. Just goes to show how weak you all are. All three of you. My greatest failures.*

Malix sneers at him, baring his teeth. *Maybe if you'd done this sooner, we could have had normal fucking lives while you drove yourself mad trying to find a way to access the shadow realm.*

You had everything! Quinton snaps, abruptly halting and swiveling around to bare his teeth at us. *I provided everything you could ever want, and you threw it all away. For what? A bitch?*

Frost cuts in, his tone like ice. *Some wolves prefer to adore their mate rather than murder her.*

Quinton roars. It's not a howl. Not really. It's more like the ferocity of a tiger's angry cry. *You forced my hand, you insolent little shit. And you,* he adds, his gaze swiveling to me. *You brought this on. You ruined everything by turning my feral shifters away from their true purpose. You forced me to kill her!*

Maybe I'm imagining it, but I swear his voice cracks on that last word. There's an almost fanatical gleam in his eye. Between the overwhelming amount of shadows in his body and his recent murder of Felicity, I think Quinton has finally gone completely off his rocker.

Nobody needs clarification on who he means by "her." A low rumble arises all around us among Felicity's wolves, all of them growling and snarling at the man who took their alpha away from them.

I should probably be scared of the beast that looms before us. Hell, I should probably be pissing myself in fear, wishing I could just run away, as far and fast as possible. In this shape, Quinton could snap me like a twig. This is the man who nearly killed me not all that long ago, and I have no doubt he intends to rectify that previous failure tonight.

But although I can feel fear stirring low in my gut, it's eclipsed in this moment by the anger that burns like fire in my veins.

Lifting my nose into the air, I narrow my eyes at the monster before me. *I didn't snap Felicity's neck. You did.*

All because of you, he seethes, his voice low and dangerous. *You took my feral shifters. You came into my territory. You allied with my enemies, snuck into my village, and launched an attack on my pack unprovoked.*

Unprovoked? The word bursts from me on a laugh. *You can't be serious.*

He doesn't acknowledge my outburst. *We're here to right the wrong*

you've done to us.

As if you care about your fucking pack, I snarl. They're just a means to an end for you. Bodies you're perfectly willing to stuff full of shadows and sacrifice in your quest for power.

Quinton's massive black-furred head makes a slow, deliberate arc to indicate the wolves standing silently around him. *You're wrong. Now more than ever, my pack is my purpose. And now, I have a veritable army of newly made shadow shifters who will destroy you and the traitors who chose you above their alpha.*

Malix laughs, and the sound is so disdainful, I almost don't recognize that it's him. *Maybe if you hadn't been such a shitty alpha, we wouldn't have abandoned you.*

A vicious growl tears from Quinton's throat. I see the exact moment when the switch flips. When he goes from boastful, confident alpha to raging madman. The thin thread of humanity that glinted in his glowing eyes vanishes in an instant.

Suddenly, he's nothing but a monster made of shadow, a being fueled by rage and made for death.

Then he lunges.

Right at me.

KIAN

JUST LIKE THE night when Quinton nearly executed our mate with a bullet to the head, I don't hesitate.

I'm in the air a split second after my old alpha's paws have left the dirt. I intercept his leap and slam into him in mid-air, angling so that I hit his head with my chest. He's so massive that it feels like a rock wall slamming into me, and I huff out a pained breath. If I were any smaller or weaker, I have no doubt his skull would have broken a few bones in my torso.

Quinton flies away from me while I fall to the ground, winded. I barely manage to land on all fours as he skids away from me, kicking up dirt and stones and clumps of grass. All around me, chaos breaks loose as the Silver Crest wolves and Blood Moon pack launch into an all-out war.

In the very short half second I have before Quinton stands, I glance around and consider our odds. We're on Felicity's turf now, and there are more of us physically than there are of them. Both will give us an advantage. Unfortunately, they have way more shadow wolves than we do, which levels the playing field a little too much for my comfort.

Then they've got Quinton, leveled up with every shadow he could force into his body until he's nothing but power and rage. Between that, his dark magic, and the army of newly turned feral shifters, I'm not confident we'll come out on top here.

That doesn't mean I'm going to give up though. If there's one thing Quinton taught me in the years he held sway over me, it's that failure is never a fucking option.

Quinton rushes me, furious and howling with a sound that seems more like a guttural scream than a wolf's growl.

The thing about blind rage is that you can't aim well with it. It's a loaded cannon, raw gunpowder in a house fire, capable of exploding but not being controlled.

Using that to my advantage, I sidestep Quinton's attack and whip around, slamming my hind end into his as he passes me. He pitches forward, stumbling a little, but rights himself quickly.

This time, he doesn't leap at me right away. He circles back to peer at me, his back arched and his head low like he's stalking me.

Like I'm prey.

Fuck that. I'm nobody's prey.

My muscles tense, my lips drawing back in a snarl as my hackles rise. I'm ready to fight my old alpha to the death, right here, right fucking now. But as we circle each other, surrounded by the yips and howls of battle, a flicker of something glints in his blue eyes.

Fear.

He drops back a little, and as he does, several of his newly made shadow shifters leap forward to attack, bounding toward me with their fangs bared.

Coward! I yell, ducking the blow of a heavy paw as I turn my attention toward the new threat.

As strong as Quinton is now, he knows I'm strong too. And he clearly isn't interested in a fight where the odds are even. Where he's not guaranteed a win. So he sent his fucking minions after me instead.

Snapping and snarling, I take out my frustrations on the shadow filled beasts who used to be my pack mates—if I could ever really call them that. They never liked me when they were in their right minds, and now that they're filled with fury and violence, acting only on Quinton's commands, the fact that we once belonged to the same pack hardly seems to matter.

From the corner of my eye, I catch sight of my brothers as they battle against more of Quinton's shadow shifters. They're holding their own all right, although both of them seem to have half an eye on their fight and half an eye on Amora.

She looks like a warrior wolf, breathtaking in her intensity and skill. I watch as she takes down a rival wolf twice her size, ripping out his throat with a wash of blood. That wolf is barely on the ground before she's moved on to the next, helping one of Felicity's shifters against a triad of enemies. She moves like water, all fluid grace.

I've seen this same kind of strength and determination in her before—the

day she chased me down on her bike and kicked my ass in the woods outside Oscura. I respected her then, just a little, although I never would have admitted it.

Now... something swells inside my chest, something I don't really recognize. Pride, maybe, with a hint of affection, or something... stronger? *Love?*

A sharp pain in my flank drags my attention back to the fight, and I curse myself inwardly for letting my focus lag. Only Amora could do that to me during the heat of battle, but it's something I can't afford right now. I need to stay sharp.

I mow through two of the smaller shadow shifters with a few well-placed bites, tossing them around like puppets until their necks snap, then I launch myself toward a third. We slam into one another, and he growls, batting at my face with his large front paws. I use my head to swipe his paws away, then swing back to headbutt him.

Before I can finish the job, a startled yip from Amora chills my blood.

Fuck. She's in danger.

I look away from my opponent, frantically searching for her in the crowd. The shadow wolf takes advantage of my momentary distraction and tackles me. We fall to the ground hard, and my head slams into the dry dirt.

But not before I see what's caused Amora to cry out.

Shadows.

Not shadow shifters. Just shadows—like the ones Felicity once sent after us, the ones Quinton eventually gained control over.

I thought we killed all of them, but I was wrong.

They're nearly indistinguishable from the dark of the night, but as I look closer, my eyes find them swarming the desert around us. Several have already reached our allies, latching on to them like leeches. But I know Felicity's wolves can't fight them.

And neither can Amora.

A dark form leaps toward her, and she yips again, whining desperately as she tries to evade the attack.

I buck against my opponent, tossing him off me with a growl. I follow him into a roll and clamp my teeth down on the back of his neck, giving a powerful snap of my jaws to sever his spine. Then I leave him crumpled on the ground and race toward her.

Frost has already reached her when I arrive. His sharp teeth are latched on

to a giant shadow that seems to be completely enveloping her, obscuring her wolf from view entirely. Beneath the shadowy form, her claws scrabble for purchase at the ground.

Help, Frost orders me. This thing is too fucking strong. I've never felt a shadow like this one before.

Malix limps up, joining the two of us as we grab hold of the shadow and pull. I understand what Frost was talking about immediately. The thing feels like rubber in my teeth, more substantial than any other shadow I've ever touched before. It clings to Amora as if it has teeth, and it takes all our strength combined to rip the thing into three pieces. It dissipates in smoky pieces and disappears, revealing a wide-eyed, breathless Amora clinging to the ground with her front paws.

There are deep grooves near her claws—as if she was somehow being pulled, even though we haven't moved at all.

She gasps for air and stumbles to her feet, swaying a little. I press up against her side to help her steady herself as she gasps for breath.

What the fuck was that? She shakes her head, fear clear in her eyes. *It was... it was trying to drag me down.*

I blink at her. Before I can ask for clarification, we're distracted by two new shadow wolves who throw themselves at us. Between the four of us, we manage to fend them off, working as a team to separate them and bring them down.

In the momentary reprieve as the shifters fall, Malix turns to Amora. *What do you mean 'dragging you down'?*

It was like... She pauses, her lips pulling back from her teeth in a grimace. *Like the shadow was pulling me away from this plane. Dragging me to the shadow realm. Is that possible? Can they do that?*

Shit. Malix curses. *I don't know. I've never seen it happen, but that doesn't mean it's not possible. There's still a lot we don't know about the shadow realm, and the shadows themselves.*

I exchange horrified glances with Frost, although of course his horror isn't quite as plainly visible as I'm sure my own is. Even in wolf form, Frost has never been one to emote all that much.

If that shadow had succeeded...

Fuck. Could Amora even survive what exists in the other realm? Unease prickles up my spine at how close we just came to losing her.

We need to take those shadows out, I tell my brothers. *As fast as we can.*

We're yanked back into combat as several of Quinton's wolves burst into our little circle, breaking up the party.

I pounce on the nearest Blood Moon wolf, taking him down to the ground, while Malix and Frost tag team a shadow shifter. Picking up the wolf with my teeth, I fling him at two more advancing wolves, taking them down like pins in a bowling lane.

When I glance back up, Malix and Frost are having trouble with their shadow shifter. The beast is big, and he must've been pumped full of more shadow magic than the rest, because he fights almost like a Berserker, wild and brutal. I leap over one of the fallen wolves and head toward them to help, only to stop cold as Amora screams my name.

Kian!

Whirling around, I find her darting over the uneven terrain in a mad zigzag pattern while a huge shadow chases after her.

Protective fury lances through me, and I sprint to her side just as the shadow gets a hold on her head and shoulders. She yelps and skids to a halt, pulling back against the shadow's grip.

Kian! Fuck. It's taking me! She scrabbles at the dirt, small whimpers falling from her mouth.

The terror in her voice sends panic rushing through my veins. I lunge for the shadow, finding a hold on it with my teeth. The damn thing is solid and way too strong, clutching Amora with supernatural power. But I don't give in. I tug on it with all my might, digging my heels into the ground for better leverage.

My muscles strain and burn, and my heart thuds against my ribcage. Amora snarls—a sound not of anger, but of pain—and I bite harder. The shadow tears away beneath my teeth, and I fall back, the shredded piece of its form tasting like ash on my tongue. But it isn't enough of a wound to stop the beast.

Amora stumbles sideways from the sudden loss of the shadow's hold on her. She goes down hard, scrabbling to get back up as the shadow slithers over more of her body.

I leap toward the monster again, only one thought pounding in my head like the rhythm of my heartbeat.

The prophecy.

The prophecy.

The prophecy.

The witch told my brothers and me that our bond with Amora would lead to her destruction. Is this that moment? The consequence of the three of us claiming her?

I tear at the shadow, not holding anything back as I try to rip it to pieces.

This must be the moment the seer warned us about, the moment we've all been trying to avoid. Amora being here with us, fighting alongside us and targeted by Quinton's shadows because of his hatred for her, is going to result in her death.

No. I can't let that happen. I'm not going to let that happen. No matter what I have to do, I'll subvert it.

I'll save her.

I'll stop the seer's vision from coming true.

My teeth aren't doing anything other than tearing off small pieces of the beast. I need to get between it and Amora, divert its attention from her and onto me. But the dark creature is spread over her like a glove. She's on the ground, only her legs visible, but I can still hear her snarling and fighting back. Her struggle is all in vain though, since she can't even touch it.

Clamping my teeth on a wider section of the shadow down near her leg, I rip at it with all my might. The shadow lets out a screech like rusted metal on metal, but the shred opens up a hole big enough for my paw.

Good.

I immediately reach into the shadow and begin to wedge myself between them. As if startled by my sudden change in tactic, the shadow jolts, then begins to backtrack toward me. Part of it wraps around my head and neck, and I twist my head to snap at the strange, rubbery feel of it.

Then something painfully hot and sharp slices into my jaw.

I smell the blood before I feel it welling up on my fur. It spills down my chest where itmingles with the dirt beneath us with a coppery scent.

The pain radiates through me, but I keep shoving my way beneath the shadow anyway. With my feet beneath me and the shadow against my back, I shove against the ground and tear the shadow away from Amora's prone form. With heavy footsteps, I manage to straddle her, opening up a clear space for her to scramble out.

I glance down at her, barely visible in this deep, dark place beneath. My blood soaks her fur, pouring freely from me.

A lot of blood.

More than there should be.

A wave of lightheadedness washes over me.

Get out, I snarl at Amora.

She stares up at me with those beautiful, wild green eyes. *No! You're hurt. You can't do this alone.*

My initial instinct is to growl at her, to snarl for her to move her ass before I give her reason to. But it doesn't feel like the right instinct anymore.

So I simply say, *Please. Please go.*

Her eyes widen and her jaw opens slightly in surprise. Then she snaps her snout shut. *I'll get Malix and Frost.*

As she starts to roll over onto her belly so she can crawl out from beneath me, the shadow shifts.

The few places that still cling to her body like tentacles snap away from her and wrap around me.

A strange tugging sensation turns the world on its axis. The darkness crawls over my chest, my bloody neck, and up my snout, moving swiftly. I'm too weak from the blood loss to fight it. My only goal was to get the shadow off Amora, and I did that.

At least I did that.

That thought resonates in my mind as the shadow yanks me down, swallowing me whole.

I get one last brief glimpse of Amora's face before the shadow drags me through the veil between the shadow realm and earth.

Then all I see is blackness.

Amora and her men's story concludes in *Claimed Mate*, book four in the *Feral Shifters* series.

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Even though I want to hate them all, they keep getting under my skin in ways I can't explain. But if I let myself lose focus for even a second, it won't just be me who pays for it. My brother will suffer too.

I've danced with the devil plenty of times...

But this time, the dance might kill me.

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