

MATED TO THE NIGHT ②



FIGHTING FOR THE PACK

LINDSEY DEVIN

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A FORBIDDEN SHIFTER ROMANCE

MATED TO THE NIGHT
BOOK 2

LINDSEY DEVIN

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Try Wolf King!

Fighting For The Pack

BRYN

I sat up with a sharp gasp, my body shaking. I knew that something—possibly everything—was wrong.

My eyes snapped open, revealing nothing but pitch blackness. The ground beneath me was cold, damp, and rough against my back. The air smelled like the musk of wet moss and swamp. I tried to lift my hands, and found my wrists bound. My ankles, too, were tied with rope. I sat up with a whimper and scooted back, back, back until I felt a craggy, jagged wall at my spine.

A cave? I thought, my mind reeling. But how? Why?

The moment the question entered my mind, the answer came rushing back to me.

I WAS WALKING up the steps in Violet's cabin, headed toward the restroom to freshen up after talking with Tavi and Violet. On the stairs, my wolf suddenly stirred, scratching at me to let her out.

Someone knocked on the door. Violet went to answer it. Before I could warn her, before she had even touched the knob, the door was kicked open. We froze as the figure of the man I had believed (hoped!) I would never see again filled the doorway. He wore all black, matching the darkness of his eyes. He looked from Violet, to Tavi, who had gotten to her feet, and finally to me.

The moment his eyes met mine, I was positive that he had figured out that I was different now. The expression on his face morphed from rage to

curiosity, and then finally to delight. I felt my bones shiver as his lips pulled away from his teeth in that terrible grin.

“Long time no see, Bryn,” he said, stepping further inside. “We’ve got a lot to catch up on.”

His two closest men entered behind him: Samson, whose dirty blond hair fell in his eyes like a mop, and Harlon, who kept his black hair in a buzz cut. They also wore only black, wrapped tight around their unbelievably strong bodies.

“Get the hell out of my house, Troy Redwolf,” Violet snapped. There wasn’t a trace of fear in her tone. “If you know what’s good for you, pup, you’ll turn tail and—”

Troy’s hand snatched out, gripping her upper arm with his wolf’s claws extended. The scent of Violet’s blood—sharp and metallic and tinged with her sweet, floral scent—cut through the air. Troy’s teeth became fangs and he pierced them into her neck. Violet would have screamed, but he pulled his head back, viciously ripping through her skin. More blood spurted from the wound, drenching the wall with blood.

The sight of the beautiful, strong Violet falling to the ground nearly broke me. It sent me back to the time before I had a wolf, before I found out I was a shifter, when I had been at my most vulnerable. I sank down to a crouch, my body shaking as I watched the terrible scene through the wooden railing. Troy wiped blood from his chin with the back of his hand.

“Violet!” Tavi called, her voice a half-growl. She launched out of the kitchen with all the grace and terrible focus of a predator. She lunged at Troy, but Samson grabbed her and slammed her to the ground so hard, the entire cabin trembled. The breath was forced from Tavi’s lungs in one awful, sharp second, and as she writhed on the ground, Samson covered her with his body and knocked her unconscious.

Troy laughed as Harlon mounted the stairs. His dark brown gaze riveted on me, and I was so paralyzed with fear that all I could do was watch as he approached. I winced as he grabbed me by my shoulder and lifted me to my feet. He forced me down the stairs, each step bringing me closer to Troy and his horrific smile, which was stained red with Violet’s blood.

“That’s a good girl, Bryn,” he said as Harlon forced me onto the landing. “Just as meek as I remember you.”

Just then, Pax—precious Pax—burst into the cabin. The room froze as every eye turned his way.

“P-Pax,” I whispered, my heart pounding in my chest.

His hands began to sharpen to little wolf claws, and his ears became pointed and tufted with fur. He scratched at Troy, who watched him with cold, passionless eyes. Crimson dripped from Troy’s hand, the one still smeared with Violet’s blood, and fell to the floor, forming a small pool. Troy’s claws twitched as Pax tried to bite him.

“Pax, no!” I yelled, fear for him forcing me into action. I elbowed free of Harlon’s hold. “Pax, get out of here!”

But it was too late. Troy lifted the boy by the back of his shirt, and Pax yelped. The sound of it tore me in half. Harlon, surprised by my sudden strength, recovered quickly. He grabbed me by the back of my neck and forced me against the wall. I tried to push away, but he gripped my hands and held them behind my back. I squeaked with pain as he pressed me to the wooden wall.

Troy chuckled and approached with Pax, who fought and kicked and whimpered to little effect. I watched with wide eyes. My wolf was quiet, which only added to my terror. Once again, I was alone, with Troy leering down at me. I tried to fight Harlon’s hold, but he tightened his grip until I felt the joints of my wrists pinch against each other.

“I see your love for pups hasn’t changed,” Troy said. I felt his hot breath on my face; it reeked of Violet’s blood. “I’m going to kill this boy and your friend the same way I killed that old bitch.”

I forced myself not to look at where Violet lay with blood pooling around her.

“I’ll make you watch me bleed them dry,” he said, staring into my eyes, his gaze piercing my soul.

“No!” I said with tears in my eyes. “Troy, I—I’ll go with you willingly—just, please, let the boy and Tavi go.” It hurt to say, but I meant it. Though I had formed lifelong relationships with the Wargs, though I had found the love of my life here, I would leave it all behind so long as it guaranteed the safety of Pax and Tavi.

Troy chuckled. “That’s what I like to hear.” He looked at Harlon and winked.

The next thing I knew, there was a sharp pain at the back of my neck, and my vision swam. I sagged against the wall. The last thing I heard was Pax’s whimpers.

AND NOW I was here in this cave, with only the occasional drips of water from the stalactites above to keep me company. I pulled my knees against my chest and wrapped my arms around them. The darkness pressed in around me, oppressively opaque...until I heard a howl from somewhere distant.

My wolf! Immediately, I remembered the lessons I'd had with Night, and I closed my eyes and searched for my wolf. I found her crowded toward the back of my mind, just as she'd been when I had no idea that I was a shifter. *I'm so sorry, girl. I did it again, didn't I?* In the wake of Troy's presence, I'd been so afraid that I had forgotten who I was.

I worried that my wolf would be angry, but as she came bounding toward me from that far place, all I sensed from her was relief. My own relief swept over me, I could have trembled and cried with the force of it. When I opened my eyes again, I was no longer blind.

I was indeed in a cave, and I was alone—wait, no! There was another scent on the air, a sweeter, lighter note that I immediately recognized as belonging to Tavi. I turned my head, and found my friend a few yards from me, still unconscious, slumped forward where I was placed against the wall. Her long, black hair fell over her face, obscuring her features from me.

"Tavi!" I called, my voice echoing just slightly.

Tavi didn't move.

I tried again. "Tavi, wake up!"

Again, my friend remained still. Dread began to drip down my spine like the cold water sliding down my leg. For a moment, I worried that Tavi might be dead. I tugged at my bindings again, but I wasn't strong enough to pull them apart. I heaved a desperate sigh, almost a sob, and used my feet to drag myself away from the wall and closer to Tavi.

"Octavia, please..." My voice wavered. "Please, open your eyes. Don't be dead..." *I don't want to be alone again.*

And this time, though my voice was softer and thick with tears, Tavi began to stir, her sneaker twitching against the ground.

"Tavi!" I exclaimed, as her eyes fluttered open.

"Bryn?" Tavi lifted her head and looked from side to side, her shifter eyes glimmering amber in the dark. She, like me, had her arms and ankles bound. "What the fuck is this?" she demanded, testing her bonds. "What happened?"

"Troy happened," I whispered. "He kidnapped us."

Tavi's lips pulled back from her teeth and I saw the flash of her sharp, white canines gleaming through the darkness. "That son of a bitch," she spat.

This was in such sharp contrast to the young woman I had come to know that it put a shiver down my spine. But I was just happy that my friend was alive, unlike—

I shifted closer to Tavi. “Are you hurt?”

“My back is still sore, and my head hurts something awful.” She tilted her head first to one side and then to the other until a soft crack came from her neck. “Ah, that helps.” She turned to me. “How about you? Are you feeling alright?”

“Yeah, I’m...I’m okay.” But that wasn’t true. In answering the question, my thoughts again returned to the compound—to Violet, to Night, and to Pax. I snipped that thought at its root before it could take hold and spread through my mind like a weed. I couldn’t think about Violet or worry about Pax. Not right now. Instead, I tried to calm myself, focusing on the sounds of the cave. In the distance, I heard the faint babbling of a river.

“Where are we?” Tavi asked.

“I’m not sure, but it can’t be very far from the Kings’ compound.” I paused, thinking a bit more, trying to remember the geography of the area. *Were there any caves on the maps I’ve seen?* As I racked my brain, the sound of the river reached my ears again, and I knew that it wasn’t within the cave but outside it. “I think we’re on the outskirts of the Kings’ territory,” I said slowly. “Near the Kootenai River.” If I was right, that put us very close to the Canadian border.

“Dammit!” Tavi kicked her bound legs. Her cheeks filled with red as her temper flared. “We’re so far away! I can’t believe I let us get captured. How could I have let this happen?”

Guilt panged in my chest. “Tavi, don’t think like that—”

Tavi’s eyes blazed through the darkness. “Bryn, it was my job to keep you safe. I made a promise to Night that I would protect you no matter what.” She shook her head. “I broke that promise.”

“No, Tavi, it’s not your fault. It’s mine.”

Tavi paused in her kicking, staring at me.

“If not for me, you would be safe at home...a-and Violet wouldn’t have been...” *Killed*, but I couldn’t say that. “I’d grown so comfortable with you and the others. I should have kept my distance.”

“Bryn, stop.”

I looked up at Tavi and found her eyes had softened from the fiery amber they’d been moments before. Tears glimmered like gems along her lower

lids. “Don’t think like that. This isn’t your fault. It’s Redwolf’s. He’s the one who decided to trespass over our borders. He’s the one who chose to spill blood on Wargs soil.” She bit her lip, and I wondered if she was remembering the sound of Violet’s head knocking against the wooden floor. “That could never be your fault, Bryn.”

I heard Tavi’s words, but the doubts persisted in my mind. I knew that Troy was doing this to get back at Night after he humiliated Troy the night of the challenge ceremony, but that didn’t lessen the burden that settled on my shoulders. Troy was *my* problem. He worked tirelessly to be the bane of my existence; he was a man who thrived off the pain he caused me. If I had been able to escape the night of the challenge ceremony, if I hadn’t fallen into his trap, none of this would have happened.

True, I might never have learned that I was a shifter or connected with my wolf, and I wouldn’t have experienced the heartbreakingly sweet love I had found with Night, but at least I wouldn’t have dragged anyone else into my problems. If I had escaped, then I would be the only one who had to answer to Troy—not Night, Violet, Tavi, or Pax.

I was a curse.

Inside, my wolf whined. I still hadn’t mastered communication with my wolf, but I knew that there was sorrow in that whine. It made me sad, too, to think that all those wonderful things might not have happened.

“You are wonderful, girl,” I told her. *“But if things had gone smoothly from the beginning, the Wargs wouldn’t have me around to fuck up their lives.”*

“Hey,” Tavi’s voice pulled me from my thoughts. “Stop that. I can see the worry lines forming on your forehead.”

I looked up to see that Tavi had shifted closer so that our legs almost touched. “You’re too cute to give yourself wrinkles.”

That comment startled a laugh out of me. “You’re silly, Tavi.”

She smiled, but it quickly faded away. Good humor couldn’t last long given our situation.

“You know,” she said, “I heard that Troy was fucking crazy. There were rumors that he doesn’t have control of his men even though he’s the son of the Alpha. Talk was going around that he and the Kings have been going downhill since he took on the Alpha mantle. I guess that must be true if he’s willing to go through all of this trouble.”

“I can’t say if those rumors are true, but he’s always been a hotheaded

asshole,” I said. “And he’s always had it out for me. Like a personal vendetta, and I don’t know why. He used to go out of his way to bully me and embarrass me. He treated me like I was nothing.” Thinking of it now, my skin began to crawl. “There was something so *sick* about his determination to make my life miserable.”

Tavi shook her head, disgust curling in her upper lip. “‘Sick’ is the right word. But then, ‘psychotic’ or ‘unhinged’ also work. He has to be all of those things to think he’s in your league.”

It was with a fresh wave of surprise that my laughter filled the air. Tavi quickly joined me. I had no idea if Tavi’s joke was any good, or if we both just needed an opportunity to let off some steam. Either way, as the laughter died down, the reality of our situation began to close in again.

“Can you get loose?” Tavi asked.

“No. I think they’ve put handcuffs on us.”

“Here, let me try something.” Tavi scooted back toward the wall and found a sharp spot. She rubbed the metal cuffs against the jagged surface but only succeeded in chipping chunks of rock from the wall. I scooted to the wall beside Tavi and tried the same technique, but I was just as unsuccessful.

“*Damn it all!*” Tavi shouted, loud enough that I winced. Even without my superior shifter hearing, Tavi’s voice would have made my ears ring. “We need a plan, Bryn. I don’t want to stick around to see what that psycho has planned.”

“Me neither,” I said. As Tavi’s echoing voice began to fade from my ears, I heard the rush of the river again. I remembered the last time I’d heard the sound of the Kootenai—it had been the day after Night had kidnapped me, when he’d held me in his arms and walked across the chilly water to get me to the opposite shore.

I remembered how angry I’d been about the whole situation, how helpless I’d felt in the presence of the strong Alpha who’d wanted to use me for his personal gain. I had wanted to escape then, too, believing that I had found myself in the clutches of another Troy. But even at the time, some part of me understood that as long as Night held me in his arms, nothing could hurt me. Not even the cold.

My chest filled with a deep ache when I thought of the way Night felt pressed against my body, the way he smelled, the way his hair passed like silk through my fingers, and those eyes which seemed to perpetually glow that fierce shade of green.

And then the guilt returned, but it wasn't a pang this time. It was a pressure wrapping around my throat like the cuffs at my wrists and ankles.

How could Night ever love me when it's my fault that Troy captured his sister? How could he ever want to claim me when I am the reason his mother is dead?

"Bryn? What should we do?" Tavi was watching me, wanting to hear that I had come up with some strategy to get us out.

I shook my head. "I don't know. I'm so sorry..." Tears streamed down my cheeks as the emotions became too much.

"Bryn, don't cry." Tavi leaned her head against my shoulder and pressed the back of her hand to mine. It was a poor substitute for her usual, warm hug, but I would never refuse the comfort of my friend, no matter how selfish that made me.

"Come on," she continued. "We have to come up with a way to escape."

But I couldn't stop my tears. I knew I had doomed us both to whatever terrible fate Troy Redwolf had planned for us.

NIGHT

I was in my wolf form with Dom at my side, vibrating with rage in my mother's cabin. With the stench of Redwolf and blood permeating our noses, we were itching to hunt him down.

All over the compound, I heard the howling of my wolves. They knew their Alpha was enraged, and they were eager to get to me and find out why. I could hear the sound of their paws scraping through dirt and leaves as they drew closer. Soon, I'd have the resources I needed to make sure I put Troy and every wolf who'd helped him in the ground.

Dom and I rushed out to meet my wolves, but a tiny groan from the entry of the cabin stole all of my momentum. I shifted back to my human form and about-faced, rushing back to the spot where I'd left Mom's body.

I'd placed her hands over her stomach, but when I arrived, I found she had moved. Her hands were on the ground, her claws partially extended, her nails digging small scratches in the wood.

"Mom?" I dropped to my knees beside her. "Mom!"

She didn't respond.

With a trembling hand, I touched her throat. At first I felt no pulse, but when I applied a bit more pressure I could feel it beating—only barely.

Relief slammed into me so hard that my own heartbeat stuttered. Beside me, Dom dropped a pair of pants for me. He was still in his wolf form, but must have anticipated my need.

"*She's alive?*" Dom asked.

I nodded, pulling on the pants. "She's got a pulse, but it's weak."

"*I'll get the doctor.*"

“Wait.” He stopped immediately. “Tell Doc to come to my cabin. It’s not safe here. And let the others know to stand by.”

Dom nodded, but hesitated before he left. “*Her wound. It smells sort of strange, doesn’t it?*”

It did. In addition to the stench of blood, there was a sickly-sweet, almost licorice smell to it. I thought I knew the cause of it already, but I wasn’t ready to confirm my fears.

“Tell Doc that she was bit by an Alpha,” I said. “And tell him to fucking book it.”

Dom shuddered, his skin rippling under his fur in horror. Within seconds, he was out the door, his wolf kicking up dust and dirt in his wake.

Gingerly, so gingerly, I scooped Mom into my arms and ran to my cabin. I was sticky with her blood—it was smeared over my chest and arms—and my nose was filled with it. My mom was such a strong, incredible woman, it ripped at my soul to see her like this. My wolf whined and howled, torn in two. He wanted to make sure our mother received the assistance she needed, but at the same time, our mate was gone.

I gritted my teeth. I felt like I was being ripped in half.

At my cabin, I placed Mom in the same room where I’d kept Bryn. It looked the same as the day she’d left to live with Mom. Clean, beige linen and a faded blue quilt lay folded at the foot of the bed. It was sparse, simple, and so very, very unlike Mom’s bright, colorful cabin.

The moment her head hit the pillow, I left her just long enough to throw on a shirt and grab a clean linen sheet. There was a gaping, gory hole at the spot where her shoulder and neck met. Since she was alive, the wound should have started healing, but it hadn’t. The skin around the wound was puckered and covered with thin, black veins. Those veins prevented the muscle and sinew from knitting back together.

I knew the cause of those black lines from the bitter, saccharine stench of it. This was an Alpha wound. Those veins would send Troy’s will for her to die through her body like a virus, one that she would have to fight off even after the wound healed. The wound would scar, and the black veins would remain like a brand. *If she healed. If she survived.*

I was vibrating with rage as I tore the linen into strips. I pressed the cloth to the wound and applied pressure to slow the blood flow. When I thought about Redwolf, I thought about vengeance and death. I wished I had the monster in front of me now. I longed to taste Troy’s blood on my tongue. I

would *kill* him even if it took my dying breath.

After what felt like hours, Dom and the doctor arrived. I turned as they stepped into the room. Dr. Damon Stan was in his mid-fifties, with short, wheat-blond hair that was graying at his temples. He was small for a wolf, but clearly that hadn't stopped him from pursuing his hard choice in career.

Doc cursed under his breath when he saw Mom, scoping the Alpha wound immediately. He didn't waste time in greeting me, immediately starting to treat his patient. He knew that formalities meant nothing to me as my mom lay dying on the bed in front of us.

I backed away as he worked, pressing my spine to the wall. My blood coursed boiling hot through my veins, and my hands clenched into fists. My wolf's growling became more insistent and he began banging around inside me, scratching for control. It was annoying and distracting, but I wouldn't ask him to stop. My muscles were so tense that veins stood out visibly on my arms and my legs. It felt wrong for me to just stand there, doing nothing as Doc saved her life.

"Come on, Violet," he mumbled under his breath, pouring some fluid onto a strip of cloth. "This isn't your time to die." He touched her forehead, her hair.

She groaned, her fingers twitching at his voice and touch.

He took a deep breath and pressed the cloth to her neck. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

She arched off the bed, gasping with pain. It was too much for me to watch, to hear. I stormed out of the room, ripping the doorknob free from the door as I did. My heart pounded hard in my chest, my fangs slowly elongating. I was going out, I was going to find my mate, and I was going to murder Redwolf.

But a hand gripped my shoulder, bringing me up short. I snatched myself away from the hand, tearing my shirt in the process, whirling around to find my beta standing there. Dom's face was pale and pinched tight, and his forehead was beaded with sweat. His eyes were full of concern.

"Night, you can't leave."

"What do you mean?" Speaking through sharpened fangs, my voice was a barely discernable growl. "My sister is out there. My *mate* is out there." Tavi and I weren't blood, but that didn't matter. She was pack, and she was family. "Who knows what Troy and his lackeys are doing to them?"

Dom raked a hand through his gold hair. "Do you think I don't know

that?” he demanded. “I’m trying not to fucking torture myself by thinking about that right now.”

He and I stood in the foyer of my cabin. I was feet away from the door, feet away from feeling the moon-chilled air across my face as I hunted Redwolf down. But my beta was stopping me.

I understood that he was hurting, too, but there was blood that needed to be spilled. “I have to go,” I said, turning back to the door.

I was within feet of the door, but this time, Dom put himself in my way, blocking the door with his body.

“Move!” I snarled.

“No.” Dom’s eyes glowed amber. “You need to stop and focus. We have no idea where the fuck they are, and we have no way to find them. We need to be here for Violet right now.”

My wolf snapped and snarled inside me. He was halfway to taking control of me already. Outside the cabin, I sensed the presence of my strongest wolves pacing around, waiting for my orders, standing by just as I wanted them to. Their agitation fed mine. “*Do not* speak to me about my mother, Dom,” I snapped. “*You* can stay. I’ll take a team and track them *myself!*”

“Fuck you, Night!” His fangs were sharpening, too. His voice was growling almost as much as mine. “You think you can reliably track anything in this state? And even if you were able to, do you think you would be of any use to them? Fucking *think*, Night! You’re not the only one who cares about them!”

I took a step toward my beta. “Don’t make me hurt you, Dom.”

He didn’t back down. “Going in half-cocked will put the girls at greater risk, Night, and I’m not prepared to fuck around with their safety. I want to get out there just as fucking badly as you, but the only way you’re getting through this door is if you use your Alpha voice on me. Are you that far gone, Night?”

I was tempted to do it, to make Dom bend to my power, but I’d sworn to him that I would never do that. To me, it defeated the purpose of having a beta if I could just exert my will over him whenever I wanted. It was the path of a tyrant, not a leader.

No, I wasn’t that far gone.

With a loud snarl, I punched a hole through the wall next to the door. When I pulled my hand back, there was blood and sawdust on my knuckles,

but the wounds were already healing. I closed my eyes and took a few deep breaths. I tried to soothe my wolf and my heartbeat. Dom was right; as desperately as I wanted to go out and *do* something, I didn't want to put Tavi and Bryn's safety at further risk.

After a few tense moments, Dom stepped away from the door and put his hand on my shoulder, where the shirt was torn.

The scene struck me as familiar. In the days following the raid that had taken the lives of Dom's parents, almost twelve years ago now, Dom had often wandered off alone. He hadn't wanted to speak to anyone or eat or drink anything. I had found him standing against a tree in the forest by himself with tears streaking down his face. Back then, Dom had been scrawny, almost gangly, and he was quick to argue and deflect rather than talk about his emotions. That was something I understood.

I'd seen others try and fail to connect with him, so instead of talking, I had simply leaned against the tree next to him and put my hand on his shoulder. We stood in silence for a long time, until Dom finally broke down in tears. I said nothing while he cried, and I never moved from that spot. I let Dom have that moment and offered my presence as comfort.

And now, over a decade later, Dom was doing the same for me.

I took another deep breath and nodded. "Alright. I'm calmer."

Dom let his hand fall. "I'm sorry, Night. I wish we could go out to find them."

So did I. I opened my eyes and cracked my knuckles. "Send out anyone we've got—hunters, sentinels, anyone not on duty—and tell them to fan out to find Tavi and Bryn. They can't have gone too far."

Dom nodded. I caught relief in his smile. "I can do that. I'll let you know the moment they have any leads."

I nodded again, and Dom left to carry out my orders. After the door closed, I dug my hands into my hair. I knew he was right; I knew that I needed to be smart, or I would end up burying the women I loved. But that didn't make it any easier to deal with.

Tavi was a great fighter. Both Dom and I had made sure of that after Troy and his men killed her family. I knew that Tavi would defend Bryn to her last breath, but I didn't want her to be in that position. I would never forgive myself for tasking her with taking care of Bryn if Tavi got hurt in the process, or worse, died.

Bryn, for her part, was intelligent, clever, and resourceful—she'd proven

as much when she had been hell-bent on trying to escape from me. She was a shifter now, too, which meant she was much stronger than she'd been when I first took her. But she was still coming into her power. There was so much she still needed to learn before she would really be able to fight in her wolf form.

With the girls together, their chances were much better than if either of them had been alone. But that was cold comfort to me and my wolf.

On cue, he howled so loud and so long that I felt it trembling through my bones.

Hey, I soothed. We'll get her back. I promise.

His answering whine was filled with doubt and sorrow.

Come on, buddy. We need to be united right now. I need you on my side for Bryn, alright?

He whined again, but rather than arguing, he quieted down, resting his head on his paws. I knew he was cooperating with me, but it was a lot to ask of him. I would take any level of camaraderie I could get from him right now.

I steeled myself and jogged back up the stairs. The door hung open, and the knob I'd ruined lay on the floor nearby. I sighed, knowing I'd need to find the time to fix that, and walked into the room.

"Sorry about that, Doc," I said. "I let myself lose control."

"No apologies necessary, Alpha Night." He gave me a slight smile. "Given the circumstances, I can hardly blame you for your reaction."

"I appreciate your understanding." I looked at Mom. Her wound had been cleaned and was covered with the strips of cloth I'd prepared for bandaging. Crimson beaded through the white linen, but the blood wasn't flowing the way it had been minutes before. She was calmer, and her breathing wasn't as labored. She almost seemed peaceful.

"She looks more stable, but how is she really?" I almost hated to ask, but I had to know.

"Well, she's very weak, so it'll be touch and go for the night." He used some spare linen to gently dab away the sweat on her forehead. I'd never seen Doc work on a patient, but his touch struck me as particularly gentle. Mom's eyebrow twitched at the contact, but she otherwise lay still. "She'll be in a lot of pain, but as long as she survives the night, she will recover."

"Is there anything I can do to help her?"

Doc put the cloth on the pillow beside her head and rubbed the edge of his eyebrow. "I won't sugarcoat this, Alpha. There's not much you can do.

I've seen Alpha wounds a couple times in my life, and they're never easy. Even young, healthy men don't always survive these injuries."

"She's a fighter."

The doctor nodded and smiled a bit. "Of course she is. She's your mother, after all. She couldn't have raised the greatest Alpha I've ever seen without being able to take care of herself. And you didn't know what she was like before she was your mother." His smile became wistful. "The best you can do for her is sit with her, talk with her. She should be able to hear your voice even in this state."

It was so surreal. Mom and I had spoken to each other just yesterday. She'd been lively, playful, and wise, as she always was. Seeing her now so pale and quiet made my heart ache.

"I can do that, Doc. Thank you."

"Of course." He left the strip of linen on the pillow beside Mom, and then stood. "I'll be staying in the living room, if that's alright, Alpha. If her condition changes, I want to be close enough to help in any way that I can."

Tension released from my shoulders by a few increments. Having the doctor so close made me feel a little more at ease.

"I won't make you sleep on the couch, Doc. Take my bed, please. It's a couple of doors down the hall."

"Oh, I couldn't ask you to—"

"You're not asking. I'm insisting." I slipped by him and sat on the bed next to Mom. "You're free to use my house however you'd like, Doc. Coffee, tea, beer—whatever you need, the fridge and all that's inside it is open to you."

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched Doc bow slightly. "I thank you for your exceedingly generous hospitality, but I think the only thing I'll need tonight is a place to sleep. Still, thank you."

He left to find my room, and I turned my full attention to Mom. Each breath she took was a tight, rasping pant, but at least she was breathing.

"I'm so sorry that I let this happen to you, Mom," I whispered, brushing her hair out of her face. "I swore an oath to protect this pack, yet I allowed my own mother to fall to my worst enemy."

She didn't respond, of course, but her mouth twitched. To me, it looked like an attempt at one of her disapproving frowns, and it made me chuckle.

"I know you wouldn't want me to blame myself, but how can I not? I hate when anyone gets hurt on my watch—especially when it comes to the people

I love most.” I took her hand in mine and squeezed gently. “You’ll pull through, won’t you? There’s still so much that you need to experience, so many people who need you. For one, my future children—Tavi’s future children, and Dom’s, too—they all need to know you. You’ll spoil our pups endlessly with treats and snacks, but that’s what grandmothers are supposed to do, right?”

Her lip twitched again.

I leaned down and pressed her hand to my forehead. I had watched these hands dig through soil, fend off men when I was a pup, and handle planks of jagged wood to assist in the construction and repair of cabins throughout the village. How was it possible that they could feel so thin and fragile to me now?

“I swear to you,” I whispered, “I will make sure Troy suffers for this. I’ll get Bryn and Tavi back safe and sound. But you need to be there to see it.” I squeezed her hand again. “Please, please, be there to see it.”

NIGHT

Hours passed, and I didn't sleep for even one of them. I spent all night reminding Mom of the fun we had when we were younger, the adventures we went on, the plants I helped her harvest (or stomped on as I played), and all the trouble I'd gotten into as a pup. I spoke both for her benefit—to let her know that I was there and that I wasn't going anywhere until she was better—and for my own.

As the night wore on, the ache in my chest worsened. I felt like I was going crazy the longer I sat there, but I couldn't get up to leave because what if she took her last breath while I was away?

The stories I told Mom were all I had to keep myself sane. The stories, and the memory of Bryn's smile. If she were with me, I knew I wouldn't feel so lost. If I could hold her in my arms or feel her touch, I knew I'd be able to do anything. As it was, I felt weak, like an Alpha wound was sapping my strength in addition to Mom's.

As dawn pierced through the midnight-blue sky, I heard Doc open my bedroom door. Seconds later, he walked into the room.

"Morning, Alpha Night," he said, kneeling next to Mom. "How did she do last night?"

"She's alive, thank everything."

Doc pressed his fingers to her wrist and nodded to himself. "When did her wheezing stop?"

I blinked. I hadn't even noticed. "Ah—to be honest, Doc, I'm not sure. But that's a good thing, right?"

"Yes, it's an improvement." He smiled. "She's far from her usual,

exuberant self, but she's *much* better than she was last night."

My heart ached. I breathed a sigh of relief. Even that little bit of good news was enough to make me want to cry.

"She could wake up at any time," Doc said. "If it's alright with you, Alpha, I'd love to stick around until she's awake."

"That would put my mind at ease, but will things be alright at the infirmary?"

He nodded. "I've got good doctors on shift, and if there's an issue, they know where to find me. The only thing I'd like to do is bring a few more supplies over."

I nodded. As he headed for the door, I pulled him in for a tight hug. "Thank you, Doc. Thank you so much."

A bit awkward, Doc lightly patted my back. "I did hardly anything, Alpha. She did most of the work. Your mother is an incredible woman."

I let him go and smiled. "Yes, she is."

Doc straightened his shirt and avoided looking at me. I knew that he'd never been good with compliments or expressions of gratitude. The man could live without ever receiving a single word of thanks from any of his patients, but when it came to my family, I couldn't let him off so easily.

I walked him out, and as we opened the door, we spotted Dom jogging toward us. Doc nodded at me, and then left as Dom neared.

"Any updates?" I asked, letting him inside.

Dom sighed and shook his head. "No. I've got everyone on this, but they don't have any updates for us. I thought I'd check on you and Violet in the meantime."

We walked back upstairs. "Doc says she's doing better. He told me that she should wake up soon."

"Finally, some good news."

"You're telling me." We went into Mom's room to find her breathing peacefully. Even in the short time since I had walked Dr. Stan to the door, she looked much better. There was more color to her cheeks, and she wasn't sweating. I could still see the ends of the veins that spread from the wound like the rays of a black sun, but she was alive, and hopefully she would be waking up soon.

"How are you, Night?" Dom asked. "Did you sleep?"

I looked at him, eyebrow raised. How the hell could I have slept with my mom dying right in front of me and Bryn and Tavi missing?

Dom winced. “Okay, point taken. You do look terrible.”

I sighed. “Yeah, I’m not surprised. I feel like shit.” And then after a pause, I added, “I feel like I’m being torn up inside. Like, if I don’t do something *right now*, I might just burst into flames.”

“That’s probably the mating bond, Night. After finding your mate, you’re supposed to feel powerful, not weak. But because you’re an idiot, you didn’t complete the claiming.”

I couldn’t even muster the energy to glare at him. “So what do I do?”

“You need to claim Bryn, but obviously, Redwolf has made that impossible. Until you can do that, your body and your wolf will start reacting to her absence, too. You’re only going to get weaker and weaker as time passes.”

His words chilled me, but what was even more chilling was that Bryn would have to suffer the same effects, but she wouldn’t have the same support that I had. “So, Bryn is going to be feeling this, too.”

“Yes.” Like Dr. Stan, Dom never sugarcoated the truth, not to me. “The pain won’t stop until one of you dies, and then the survivor will be free from the soulmate bond. But that isn’t to say that they’ll be ‘okay.’” He put air quotes around the last word.

“What do you mean?”

“The wolf who survives their soulmate’s death could very well go crazy from the grief.”

I couldn’t care less about myself, but the thought of Bryn being harmed ignited the need to be beside her again. My wolf began to snarl and grasp for control again, but he began to calm again as I spotted Doc through the window, carrying a tote bag of things. He nodded at Dom and me and headed inside. I heard the front door open downstairs.

“Is he staying over?” Dom asked.

“Yeah, just until Mom wakes up. He said he’s got things covered at the infirmary.”

“Good. I can’t imagine a better man keeping an eye on her. And it’ll give you a chance to rest.”

“Dom—”

“Night, listen, you won’t be any good to anyone if you don’t get a nap at least. You’re really going to want to conserve as much strength as you can until you can claim Bryn.”

I understood the logic—I even agreed with it—but dammit, it felt wrong

to sleep when I knew my mate was in danger. Dom, seeing straight through my hesitation, grabbed my shirt and tugged me out of Mom's room and down the hall to my own.

"Wait, hold up—"

He ignored me, pulling me toward my bedroom door and pushing me inside. "This is the only way I know you'll take a fucking break," he said.

"I could just leave," I replied with a glare. "What's to stop me from leaving through the window?"

"You could, but the minute I catch you walking around outside your cabin, I'll ask Doc for a sedative. Don't play games with me, Night."

I heaved a sigh. "Alright. I'll *try* to get some sleep."

He smiled and nodded. "That's all I'm asking from you." He closed the door, and I heard his steps retreating downstairs.

Alone in my room now, I sighed and ran my hands through my hair. Every corner of my room should have felt familiar, but as I glanced around, nothing felt real. My body was here, but my mind wasn't. I'd lived in this cabin since I was sixteen, but it might as well have belonged to a stranger. Without Bryn here, the space could never feel like home.

I paced back and forth. I intended to keep my mind on Bryn and Tavi and what I could do to help them, but the more I paced, the more sluggish my body became. After an hour of it, exhaustion began to weigh me down even more than my stress, and I crawled into bed.

Doc's scent was present in the room, but Bryn's scent was stronger, lingering in the sheets and the pillows. The bed itself felt eerily cold and empty. I couldn't shake the feeling that I hadn't earned the right to lie down and relax when Bryn and Tavi were in Troy's custody. But Dom was right—I wasn't a machine, and as much as I wanted to, I couldn't force myself to keep going.

I turned onto my side, pulling the covers and pillows that smelled most like Bryn to me. If I closed my eyes, I could almost pretend that I held her in my arms. I thought I would spend the next while tossing and turning and worrying, but before long, I fell asleep.

I WOKE up a few hours later. The sun was still out, and I felt a bit more rested. I got out of bed, stretched, and headed out to look after Mom.

Because I'd broken off the doorknob, the door to her room was ajar,

unable to close. Through the opening, I saw Doc sitting in the chair next to her bed. He held her wrist in one hand. With the other, he dabbed away the sweat that collected on her forehead with a cloth.

Something about the slow, gentle way he swiped the cloth across her forehead and the way he held her wrist had me tilting my head. I appreciated his care, but I couldn't help but wonder if his bedside manner was so attentive with all of his patients. Or, was he taking extra care with her because she was my mother?

I pushed the door open a bit more and started to form the question, but then I heard the front door open followed by Dom's quick steps. I turned from the door and met him at the top of the stairs.

"Hey," he said, jogging up the steps. "I would've knocked if I thought you were awake. Did you get any sleep?"

I nodded. "Do you have any updates for me?"

"No. There haven't been any breakthroughs as yet."

"How's the pack?"

"Everyone is talking about what's happened, but other than that, things are pretty quiet."

"I see." It was stupid of me, but I'd hoped that some real progress would be made while I slept.

"Have you checked on your mom?"

"Not yet, I—"

"Alpha Night." That was Doc's voice. He wasn't yelling, but excitement elevated the volume of his voice. "I think Violet is about to wake up."

Dom and I were in the room in seconds. On the bed, Mom stirred, her head turning from side to side as she fought her way through unconsciousness. I neared the bed, peering down at her, my heart beating quickly. Doc kept hold of her wrist, squeezing gently.

She huffed, her eyes slowly parting open. "Damon?" she asked gently, her voice hoarse. "That you?" Her hand tightened around his.

"It's me, Violet." He smiled. "And I'm not alone."

Her eyes, just as vibrant and green as I remembered them being, swept across the room until they settled on me.

I immediately dropped to her side and gently set my hand on her arm. "Mom, how are you feeling?" I asked. "What do you need? Are you in pain?"

She weakly pulled her hand free of Doc's so she could wave my words away. "Shut up with all these questions," she rasped. "And go and get me

some damn water.”

I was shocked that the first words she said to me after such an ordeal would be a string of commands, but then I pressed my lips together to keep from smiling. I should have guessed as much. She was *my* mother after all.

“I’ll get some water, Violet,” Dom said. “You just sit tight.”

She sighed. “I don’t care who gets it as long as I can get something cool down my throat.”

As Dom left, she tried to sit up. Doc took one side and I took the other. He adjusted the pillows behind her and I helped her sit up. I glanced at him as he fluffed the pillows, and wondered again if this was his typical bedside manner. When he was finished, Mom eased back against the extra cushion with a long sigh. By the time we got her settled, Dom was returning with the water.

She took it from him and downed it in a few large gulps, water pouring from the sides of her mouth and soaking into her bandages. If she noticed, she didn’t care. When the water was gone, she held the glass for a few moments, staring into the mug. Suddenly, her hand tightened around the pottery tight enough that it cracked. She threw the mug across the room and it shattered against the wall.

The sound of it caused both Dom and I to jump. I no longer felt like smiling. Neither of us had seen her so pissed since the night the Kings raided our village.

“Violet,” Doc said, speaking quietly. “It’s alright.”

“It’s not,” she snapped. “Damn it all. Damn *him*. I’m an idiot for letting him get the jump on me. All I could do was sit there and watch as he took them.” Her voice cracked, and her eyes shined with tears. “I’m sorry, Damon. I shouldn’t have bitten your head off like that.”

He shook his head. “You don’t have to apologize to me or anyone, Violet. You’ve survived something awful.”

She took his hand again, squeezed it, and then looked at me. “Night, you better make sure that you get my girls back here safely. Because if you don’t, I can’t be held responsible for what I do.”

I nodded. “Of course, Mom. I’ll kill anyone who gets in my way.”

“That’s my boy.” She eased back against the pillows. “That’s my boy.”

“Violet, please,” Dom said, “tell us what happened. As much as you can remember.” His eyes took in her face, her wound, and her hands as they clenched and unclenched. “And take things slow. We don’t want you to give

yourself a migraine.”

She sighed, her frown deepening as she forced herself to remember the events of the night. “Troy and two other male wolves kicked in my door. I confronted them to get them to leave, but obviously, I was useless when he bit me.”

My eye twitched. I loathed the idea that the fucker had touched her at all. “Do you remember anything else, Mom?”

She nodded. “I couldn’t move, but I was conscious. Through the pain, I heard everything that happened next. Tavi sprinted into the room, shouting something, but one of them slammed her to the ground. I think he hit her—”

A low growl filled the room, but it wasn’t from me. It was Dom. I watched him closely. I hated hearing this, too, but I wouldn’t have expected his reaction to Tavi’s pain to be so...impassioned.

Mom continued, “After that, Tavi was still. Bryn was standing on the stairs, and they started going after her. She shouted at them, tried to run, but one of those bastards grabbed her and dragged her down the stairs. She tried to fight them still, but Pax—” She cut herself off with a gasp. “How is he? What happened to him?”

I wasn’t sure. My chest throbbed with guilt for not asking after the pup who’d alerted me to Bryn and Tavi’s kidnapping in the first place, but as usual, Dom was on top of it.

“He’s fine—or, as fine as he could be given the circumstances.” His voice was tight and clipped, like he was speaking from the deepest part of himself, the part that still held some control. “He’s with his parents now.”

“Thank goodness,” Mom breathed.

“What happened after Pax?” I asked. “What happened to Bryn?”

She turned to me, her eyes large and bright green. “Troy used Pax to make Bryn agree to go with them. Not that he needed to make her agree. Shortly after that, I smelled something in the air—some drug—and I think they used that to knock Bryn and Tavi out.”

I bristled, seconds away from shifting. Bryn had once told me after we made love that Troy had convinced a pup to give her the spiked drink that led to her ending up tied up in his bedroom. It made me sick to my stomach that he would do that to her again—that she would have to suffer through it again when Troy was just going to drug her anyway.

“Night,” Mom said, pulling me from my thoughts. “I’m sorry, but Troy knows that Bryn is your mate. He would have smelled it on her the minute he

stepped through my door.”

That was too much for me to hear.

I wasn't sure how it happened, but I came to my senses in the foyer, inches away from opening the door. My wolf had taken control for a few seconds while the blow of that news hit me. I jerked away from the door, falling to the floor. My wolf gnashed his fangs, trying to force the shift. I clenched my fists, my sharpened nails piercing through my palms. I used the pain to help me focus, trying to fight for control.

Dom was suddenly at my side, trying to talk me through it. I heard Mom calling me from her room, urging me to be strong. On the stairs, I heard Dr. Stan coming down to help Dom with me.

I pushed all that outside shit away. Something was wrong with me. Never in my life had it been so difficult for me to regain control. My wolf had never fought so hard to take over. But slowly, thankfully, my wolf's hold began to lessen and lessen until I was myself again. I heaved a shuddering breath, and with Dom's help, I rose to my feet again.

“Night—”

I cut him off with a sharp shake of my head. “Not now. I just need some time to myself.”

“Right. Of course.”

Dr. Stan slipped his hands into his pockets. “I'll keep an eye on Violet while you're gone.”

“Thanks, Doc. I appreciate it.”

I turned my back to them and set off on my own. My body felt like it weighed ten tons when I first entered the forest near my cabin, but as I continued to walk, it became easier. I still felt off, not fully myself. My body seemed slow to respond to my commands, like that struggle with my wolf had put me on autopilot. And my wolf was eerily quiet now. I hoped I was just recovering from the struggle, but I knew it was more than that.

Dom had warned me that I should conserve my strength, but now that I was in the cover of the forest, I began to sprint. I needed to feel the blood pumping through my veins. If I could get my body moving, I'd feel more present. As I pushed my body to run even faster, my wolf started to stir again. This time, he wasn't trying to take control. He was grateful for the activity.

He and I both found a lot of satisfaction in feeling the breeze on our skin and through our hair—or fur, in my wolf's case. The mechanical movement of running and the woodsy scent of the forest grounded us both. I would stay

in my human form for this run, though; I couldn't trust him not to do something risky.

I couldn't blame him for losing control. The fates knew that I was close to doing the same. Every fiber in my being was telling me that I needed to shift and get to Bryn as quickly as I fucking could. But I knew I needed to use my brain, not my emotions. I was scared out of my mind about what Troy might be doing to my mate and my sister, but I couldn't dwell in that worry. If I let my emotions get the better of me again, I could make a mistake that ended up getting Bryn and Tavi hurt.

I reached the hot springs and slowed to a stop. I panted hard, my heartbeat pulsing through every inch of my body, sweat dripping from my chin and onto the forest floor. I looked at my hands. There was still blood on them, but the puncture wounds from my nails had healed.

I closed my eyes and took a few deep breaths to calm the rapid beat of my heart. When I was a pup, I had dreamed of becoming Alpha. After I achieved that, my focus had been on getting the Wargs back on their feet. Leading up to the day I found Bryn, I'd finally felt that my pack was in a good enough place that I'd be able to take control of the Kings and merge them with the Wargs.

Finding my soulmate had caused my priorities to shift. Taking over the Kings and combining them with the Wargs became secondary while Bryn and I slowly got to know each other. The Kings were meant to be mine as Gregor's oldest son, and Troy knew that. He knew that taking Bryn would not only weaken me but also delay that goal further. I couldn't keep pushing this off. I owed it to my pack to follow through on my promises, but I needed my girls home safe again.

The stakes were too high for me to let Troy's capture of Bryn and Tavi get to my head. To find my family, I needed to be smart—much smarter than my half-brother. Now that he was a full-fledged Alpha, there was no underestimating what the psycho was capable of. I would have to be overcautious and overprepared to make sure Bryn and Tavi came back alive. I needed to plan, and I needed to keep my heart as far out of that plan as I could.

The hot springs ran into pools of varying sizes. Some were large and could fit up to twenty or so people, but others were smaller and cozier. I approached one of the smaller pools, peeled off my clothes, and eased into the hot water. I leaned back against the wall worn smooth by the water and

let my head fall back against the bright green moss that lined the mouth of the pool. Steam wafted to my face, and I breathed it in until my lungs were full, letting the breath back out slowly. I did this again until my heartbeat calmed.

These hot springs were one of the jewels that the Wargs' territory provided for us. I closed my eyes and imagined Bryn sitting next to me, pressing her soft body against my arm. I hadn't had the chance to show Bryn this magical place. Knowing her, she would love to see all the tiny wildflowers that grew along the perimeter of the springs. She'd probably tell me all about them while I smoothed my hands over her back and pressed kisses to her neck.

I missed her so badly, my body ached. I needed her back. Now.

When I opened my eyes again, I lifted my head to stare through the steam and into the trees. The hot springs had worked; I felt more focused.

I was going to be slowly losing more strength each day I went without claiming Bryn, but I couldn't let that slow me down—not with my girls' lives in question. I needed to get my wolves together and we needed to find where Troy was keeping them. Then we would make him pay for all the shit he'd done.

BRYN

Stalactites and stalagmites were jagged teeth sticking out from the top and bottom of the cave but for the small hole in the ceiling near where Tavi and I sat. That hole let in a ray of bright sunshine, particles of dust glittering and dancing throughout, but that bit of beauty didn't touch either of us. Not while we were in captivity.

We were in a fairly spacious cavity within the cave. It reminded me of the cave where Vincent and I were almost attacked by three feral wolves. There had been a massive hole in the roof of that cave, and Vincent had fallen through it. It had been cool and damp like this one, but the larger hole gave access to sunshine and fresh air. This cave had no such "comforts," if they could even be called that.

To our right, the cavity narrowed into three separate tunnels. If I concentrated, I could hear the babble of the Kootenai River down one of the paths. The other two were quiet. If I had to guess, the one that sounded like the river would lead us to freedom. First, we needed to break free of these chains.

But we couldn't do it. We tried everything we could think of, including yanking at our chains, but against steel, there was nothing we could do. All we did was exhaust and bruise ourselves in the process. We tried shifting, too, but Troy had obviously planned for that. With our arms chained, we couldn't get them in position to complete the shift, so we were forced to remain human.

I had vowed to myself and Tavi that I wouldn't cry again, but this was all so frustrating and scary. After being chained up in Troy's basement and

kidnapped by Night, I had believed that I'd lived through the worst terrors of my life, but this was a whole new level of awful. Neither Tavi nor I could do anything but wait for Troy, Samson, and Harlon to return to do...whatever they were going to do to us. It was maddening.

Unable to stay quiet as my frustration and desperation mounted, I turned to Tavi. "Why can't Troy just leave me the hell alone?" I demanded. "Why can't he live his own shitty life as far away from me as possible?"

Tavi sighed. She was just as exhausted as I was, and just as at a loss. "Alphas will use those who are closest to their enemy to cause them pain and throw them off their game. Night told us that was the reason he kidnapped you at first, but now we know it was because you're his mate. Troy wants to keep Night off his game. He would have smelled Night on you, and he would've clocked that Night hadn't left a claiming mark on you. Taking you away from him will make both you and Night weaker because Night hasn't fully claimed you. If Troy keeps you away from each other long enough, Night will be an easier target."

"Fuck," I whispered, clenching my hands tight. It was impossible for me not to think back to the day Night had found me. Now Troy had, once again, bound me against my will. Only this time, he'd done it with the intention of hurting not just me, but my mate and my best friend, too.

"If me being away from Night will make him weaker," I asked, "what will happen when—if Troy kills me?"

"According to the Elders, wolves who have lost their fated mate have gone completely insane from the grief and the depth of their loss. It takes a strong soul and a powerful wolf to be able to live through something like that. Taking you proves that Troy knows that Night is stronger than him. If he wants to take Night down, this was the only way to ensure a victory."

My jaw dropped. I'd always known that Troy hated me, though I'd never understood why. Year after year, I watched him grow more and more unstable, but there was nothing I could do about it. Who would listen to me? I mean, I had been just a human girl, the most hated person in the pack. Even if I pointed out what was obviously going on, it was safer for everyone to keep their heads down rather than looking too closely at Gregor's only son.

Troy's instability was obvious now, seeing how things had turned out. The night Troy was going to become Alpha, he had locked me up in his bedroom to be his sex slave. And now he'd done it again.

When Gregor was alive, he had kept Troy on a short leash. But I

wondered now if he had done that because he, too, suspected that his son could become a liability to the pack. Gregor wasn't a sociable Alpha, and he was so old-fashioned that he kept women and children as second-class citizens in his own pack. That said, it was obvious to everyone that everything he did was to ensure the Kings' rule of the Idaho panhandle. Gregor would never have wanted to leave his pack in the hands of someone who was incapable of ruling.

Troy, however, spearheaded efforts to attack the Wargs without cause, and he lived to flaunt his power over every wolf he encountered—not just Kings and Wargs, but the Camas, too. He was a murderer and a menace who stopped at nothing to make sure he was always on top.

Ever since I was a child, my mom had drilled it into my head to respect the land so that the land would be fruitful. She had taught me that an Alpha and his pack should ensure that they ruled justly. With an Alpha like Troy, someone who desired only destruction and power, I knew it wouldn't be long before the crops died off and the land became infertile.

I wanted to talk to Tavi more about our situation and Troy's possible plans. I wanted a better idea of what we were dealing with and what our prospects would be. But before I could speak further, I heard footsteps down one of the tunnels. They were getting closer.

Tavi and I shared a look, and tried to brace ourselves as much as we could for the visitors.

Soon, Troy's face emerged from the darkness like a specter. Behind him, Samson and Harlon's faces emerged much the same way.

"I thought my ears were burning for a reason." Troy's sharp, white teeth glinted through the darkness as he sneered at us.

Seeing him and hearing his voice again sent anger lancing through my chest. All I could think about when I looked at him was Violet—the sight of her blood on his chin, her body falling to the ground, limp. It sent me and my wolf to the height of rage.

I jerked from the wall, glaring up at him. "You must have a death wish, Troy," I spat. "If you think you can enter Night's territory and kill his mother without consequences, you've got another thing coming—"

As I spoke, Troy continued walking closer. As I neared the end of my threat, his eyes, if possible, became an even darker, inkier black, and his hand shot out to wrap tightly around my throat.

Tavi screamed. I would have gasped if I had the breath to do so. As it

was, I couldn't make a sound, especially when he tightened his hold on my neck. My pulse beat wildly under his fingers, as if it alone could force him to let go. My face went hot as capillaries burst beneath my skin.

"You stupid bitch." With that, he knocked my head once, hard, against the ground, and black dots danced in front of my eyes. "Watch your fucking mouth. The whole area is going to be mine soon enough, and when *that* happens—" He knocked my head against the ground a second time as Tavi screamed for him to stop. "When that happens, I'm going to let my men have their way with the dirty Wargs women. And I'm going to enjoy it."

I couldn't say anything. Part of me knew that he wouldn't kill me—not before he'd gotten what he wanted—but that didn't stop every cell in my body from screaming for breath, screaming that he was going to choke the life out of me. I tried to jerk my body free of his grip, but no matter what I did, Troy's hand remained like a vise around my neck. My head pounded. I thought for sure that I was going to pass out.

"Let her go, you coward!" Tavi screamed.

The word caused Troy to turn to Tavi now.

"Yeah, you heard me," she went on. "Attacking a couple of women who can't even raise a hand to defend themselves? You're a *fucking coward!*"

With a snarl, Troy let me go. I gasped air back into my lungs so fast I coughed on it as Troy stalked toward Tavi.

"I knew Wargs women were stupid, but I didn't think they'd be this dumb," he said. "You know, I only took you because it would hurt Night to know that his precious sister was at my mercy, but I'm not actually interested in you."

"Lucky me," she said.

Troy's scowl deepened. "I won't tolerate any disrespect from some worthless bitch. If you're smart, you'll keep your mouth shut."

"I'm going to enjoy watching Night tear your throat out, you piece of shit."

Troy gave a chuckle, but the sound was full of darkness, of threat. "I don't think he's the one who'll taste blood."

Before Tavi could respond, Troy backhanded her. Blood spurted from her mouth and across the wall, and I didn't even have the breath to scream. Before she hit the ground, he grabbed a fistful of her shirt and punched her in the face.

Blow after blow and kick after kick landed on Tavi, leaving awful marks

and bruises across her skin. My eyes watered with effort as I tried to scream for him to stop, to take his aggression out on me instead, but I couldn't even do that. My throat was crushed, my lungs were burning, all I could do was gurgle and wheeze while inside my wolf and I howled together.

Eventually, when Tavi had been beaten so thoroughly that she couldn't remain conscious, he tossed her broken body to his two men. "Keep the bitch alive but enjoy her however you'd like."

The three men shared horrifying smiles as Harlon and Samson unlocked her shackles and dragged Tavi into the next room. Now alone with Troy, I fought to return to an upright position. I hated him so much, it burned my eyes. Troy released a low whistle as he crouched in front of me.

"Look at that glare," he said. "It might be enough to scare me...if you weren't still the same weak girl I grew up with."

"Monster!" My voice was little more than a croak, but at least my throat had healed enough that I could speak at all. "Bastard! Your father would be ashamed of you."

He gave another dark chuckle. "You don't know anything about my father."

"I know he cared enough about the pack to make sure it succeeded. I know he never lost his temper. I know he wasn't a fucking madman."

He slapped me. My teeth bit into my cheek and it hurt something awful, but he hadn't hit me as hard as he had Tavi.

"My father was *nothing* like the man he pretended to be. He was a cruel, selfish bastard who only cared about appearances."

Angry words lingered at the tip of my tongue like my own blood. The last thing I wanted was to hear Troy's sob story. It didn't matter how difficult his childhood was; it could never justify what he was doing to me and Tavi. But something was telling me that I needed to listen. *You need to find out why he's doing this*, that voice told me. *Find out what his plan is. It's the only way you and Tavi are getting out of this.*

I doubted that whatever info he gave me now would get me out of my restraints or provide anything that would be immediately useful, but perhaps more intel could work in my favor down the line.

I turned my head to spit the blood out of my mouth and returned my glare to Troy. "Then who was the real Gregor Redwolf?" I demanded. "Because from where I'm sitting, there's no way his treatment of you could hold a candle to the way he treated me, my mom, or any other female wolf. You

sound like a pup bitching about his daddy not hugging him enough.”

He slapped me, much harder this time, and then wrapped his hand around my throat again. He brought my face close to his.

“The only bitch here is you!” he snapped, spittle flying from his mouth. “You want to know what my father was like? He relished torturing me. He was a sadistic fuck who beat me every time he was bored or angry. He made me watch as he tortured wolves who trespassed onto his territory, even if all they wanted was a few scraps of food. You know how he celebrated my sixth birthday?”

I didn’t answer. I wouldn’t play his shitty guessing game. I waited for him to tell me the answer.

“He forced me to kill one of the wolves he had been torturing. It was my only birthday present.”

I couldn’t care less for the man who stood before me, a man who seemed to have made it his mission to hurt me and everyone I held dear. But there was a small part of my heart that mourned on behalf of the boy I’d known when I was a little girl. Though he’d tormented me my entire life, no child deserved to be mistreated—especially not by their own parent.

But that sympathy could never stretch to the Troy of the present day.

“Why do all this?” I forced out. “Why go after Night or me or any of the Wargs when your father was the one who hurt you?”

Troy’s angry expression shifted into a sneer. “I can’t believe your mate didn’t tell you. Keeping you in the dark isn’t very loving of him, is it?”

My wolf bristled, growling at Troy’s words, but I didn’t let that vexation show on my face as I stared at him, again waiting for his answer.

“The answer is simple, Bryn.” He pressed his thumb against the spot where my pulse beat hardest, pressing just enough to sting. “Night was Gregor’s first child.”

Surprise hit me so hard, I couldn’t keep the shock from my face.

“Ah, so you really didn’t know,” he chuckled. “Yes, Night is my older brother. Not that he was ever there for me. The only thing I wanted when I was growing up was someone who would stop the pain. My own mother was fucking useless. She was even more scared of him than I was, but she chose him over me every time.”

The last time I had seen Nora Redwolf was at Gregor’s funeral, and she had seemed so broken up, so sorrowful about the death of her husband. But knowing more about the situation behind the scenes made me question if she

had been crying because she mourned him or because she wouldn't have the same amount of protection and power that she enjoyed while Gregor was alive.

The moment Troy found his own mate, her privileges would wane at least somewhat. Given how poorly Troy spoke of his mother, it was clear that he planned to do only the bare minimum for her. If that.

"I had believed I was the only one who would have to endure my father's torture," Troy went on. "But when I was six and I'd had my first shift, he told me the truth. That he'd abandoned his true mate to become Alpha of the Kings, and that because Night is older than me, he is the real heir to the pack."

I closed my eyes as the news washed over me. Did Night know the truth? Yes, of course he did. When Violet had told me the story about Craig, the Wargs leader before Gregor, she had spoken of love and loss, and she'd started to cry. I hadn't really understood why at the time, but now it became so clear. That story had made her miss the man who'd slept with her—Gregor Redwolf.

Violet wouldn't have kept Night's parentage a secret from him. So, it was no wonder Night was determined to take control of the Kings pack. It wasn't just to ensure that the Wargs had a better way of life, though I was sure that was a big part of the reason. It was also his birthright.

My wolf whined. This was one of the few times that she and I were in perfect sync. The ensuing sense of betrayal stung my heart. Why didn't Night tell me the truth? If Night were here with me now...well, first he would probably tear Troy and his goons apart. But after that, I would demand to know why he had kept something like this a secret from me. Was he worried that I wasn't trustworthy enough to know?

My eyes opened as Troy tightened his grip around my throat. He was getting worked up again, and his claws pressed into my skin.

"After everything I did for that bastard, after everything he put me through, I still wasn't good enough. I did everything he asked without question. Still, the son he tossed away, the son who slummed with weak wolves—*Night* was his favorite heir."

I tried to keep my breathing even and slow, though my instinct was to gasp for air. I had barely enough room to breathe, I just needed to stay calm. In the meantime, I forced my pounding head to think through what I'd just learned.

I wasn't sure what I'd been expecting, but it wasn't this. I'd imagined that Troy was just born violent and cruel, or that he'd become that way due to his own actions. But now I understood that he was driven by pain, betrayal, and angst. All of his worst qualities were connected to his father, and after living under Gregor's leadership as both a human and a woman, I was surprised that the Alpha had treated his own male heir so poorly.

"If Night was your father's favorite, why did he let you lead that raid on the Wargs' compound? Why did he let you attack Wargs who were on patrol or hunting for no reason?"

"Now you're asking the real questions." He let go of my throat, allowing me to fall back against the wall. "To show me that those attacks wouldn't crush Night the way they crushed me. Night knew about me that entire time, but he never once reached out. I tried to speak to him, you know, on the day my wolves and I infiltrated the Wargs' compound. I went to speak to him myself. I found him while he was out patrolling. Before my men did anything, I wanted to bridge that gap. I thought, maybe he's been busy. Maybe that's why he never reached out to me. Maybe Father led us both astray and we got off on the wrong foot. I tried to get him to listen to me, but he attacked me the moment he saw me. He didn't let me get a word in. I said, 'Let's talk, let's bury the hatchet', but he rejected me. Just like Dad. Just like you."

Troy's eyes were soft, even sad as he spoke, but his gaze hardened again as he continued, "I tried to warn him what would happen if he went on like that. He ignored me. He hurt me. He tried to kill me. So, that night, I let my men do what they wanted."

He looked at me like everything was supposed to make sense to me now that he'd spoken his piece, like I would understand him now. "Don't you get it, Bryn? All of this would have been prevented if he had just spoken to me man to man. All of this was *Night's fault*."

My lips pulled away from my teeth. I thought about Tavi, and how broken and vulnerable she had been the night I found out about Troy's raid. I thought about the way anger darkened Night's eyes when he remembered that night.

"No, you psycho," I said. "You expected him to welcome you just because you went to see him? You expected him to just accept your olive branch if you threatened his pack? You tormented the Wargs! You hurt his friends and his family!"

“I wasn’t attacking him when I went to find him,” he said, as if that were an argument. “If he had listened to me, maybe I wouldn’t have let my men go as hard as they did.”

His dark eyes showed no remorse. He reached for me then, and I flinched, expecting him to grab my neck again. Instead, he placed his hand on my chest, between my collarbones. I shuddered at his touch.

“It hardly matters now that I have you, Bryn. Night is going to pay for leaving me alone to deal with our father. And he’s going to regret trying to show up to take the Kings from me.” He let his hands trail further down, over my breasts and stomach.

“Stop!” I jerked around, wanting him as far away from me as possible. “Fucking get *off* me!” But when I felt the press of his wolf claws in my naval, I stopped, lest my movement force those nails to puncture my skin.

His answering smirk revealed the sharpened points of his teeth. “I’m going to take everything from him. His mother was first, and now his mate.” Slowly, he removed his hand and stood up, backing into the darkness the same way he’d come.

I trembled now that he was gone. I was alone, but I still felt the phantom sensations of Troy’s hands on me, feeling me up in the darkness. I understood now that things between Troy and Night were very, very personal—especially on Troy’s end. He had tormented the Wargs and killed indiscriminately, but he still viewed himself as a pup who had been wronged because his older brother wasn’t there for him.

Tavi had told me that it was typical for rival Alphas to play dirty to get what they wanted, but what Troy was doing was so, so wrong. He felt he was entitled to vengeance, entitled to his brother’s life, and that meant that there were no rules, no morals, no mercy. This could only end violently and bloodily. I only hoped that Night could find us before the distance between us weakened him too much.

NIGHT

I stood in the conference room in the mess hall. I had hoped that I would already have Bryn and Tavi back by now, but three days had passed since they were taken and we had no leads. On top of that, my body felt sluggish, unresponsive, heavy. My wolf and I felt more like strangers as the days passed, a sensation that was so wrong, so alien. It felt like I was disconnected from my own soul, and it hurt worse every day.

It made me wonder if this was at all how Bryn felt interacting with her wolf now, feeling a stranger acting independently in your own body. If so, my heart ached for her even more.

I hadn't had a decent night's sleep since that night, and the only thing keeping me from losing control entirely was my determination to get my girls back.

But here in the conference room, I tried to enjoy a moment of peace. There would be a meeting here soon, but for now, I was alone. I walked to the wall and looked up at the framed pictures. Most of them were taken by Mom in the days after I killed Peter to become Alpha. They were images of Dom and me as teens, heading the construction of new cabins. Planks of wood, buckets of cement and paint, and felled trees were the backdrop for many of the images.

I remembered the story of each one so clearly. If I closed my eyes, I felt the blazing sun on my back, the rush of a cool beer after a day's hard work, and the taste of Mom's cooking as she and other wolves worked together to hunt and feed our pack. Things had been so hard, and the work seemed never-ending. Yet, we Wargs had persevered, and we had survived. We

hadn't received any help from other packs—Gregor had made sure of that—but we'd done well without it. We thrived.

I had spent so much of my life invested in the health and prosperity of my pack, my wolves, and my people. Now Troy stood a good chance of taking it all away from me. I'd wanted to take control of the Kings all my life, but now that things had ended up like this, I found myself questioning every decision I'd made to try and make that happen. Wanting a better life for my pack was one thing, but it was another for me to selfishly tie my own desires to the welfare of my pack.

I clenched my hands tight, my stomach churning. Maybe I was no better than my father.

I turned to the door when I heard footsteps approach. Dom popped his head in. "Hey, I've got a surprise."

"What is it?"

He opened the door wider, revealing Kai, Redford, Vince, and...my eyebrows raised when an old friend walked in. Evan Brandy, a wolf I'd grown up with and someone I considered to be a very close friend. He looked the same as when I had last seen him: chocolate brown hair, casual grin, and an old, jagged scar running vertically down his left cheek. I remembered the day he'd gotten that scar. It had been when we were eleven and an adult thought he could bully us around. My mother ended up giving Evan stitches because his parents had already died.

Evan wasn't in the pictures that hung on the wall. I'd sent him to infiltrate the Kings pack shortly after I became Alpha. Evan served as a fighter for the Kings, which put him in a prime position to learn the goings-on of the pack as well as strategy for what the Kings had planned. My trust in Evan ran as deep as my trust in Dom, so he was the only wolf I could have put in this position.

The last time Evan and I had been in the same room together was last December. That was back when Gregor was still alive and my hope of taking control of the Kings pack was still a distant dream.

It felt like years had gone by since then.

I crossed the room and pulled Evan in for a hug. He laughed, firmly patting my back. "Yeah, it's been a while, buddy."

"No kidding." As I pulled back, my grin at seeing my old friend dimmed to a small smile. "I wish we were meeting under better circumstances."

Usually, Evan only came around when there was an obvious threat to the

Wargs, which helped to keep his cover so that he wasn't disappearing from the Kings pack all the time. Dom, evidently, had brought him in now because he knew that I needed everyone I could trust on deck. I appreciated the gesture.

"Same here, Night." Evan patted my shoulder, and then crossed his arms. He wore a long-sleeved shirt and ripped jeans. He wasn't as muscular as me or Dom, despite being a fighter. But Evan was wiry and strong. I'd seen him take down wolves twice his size, so his skills as a fighter went unquestioned. Evan had almost become my beta, but Dom had come out on top in that battle.

"I'm sure you all remember what things were like at the end of Peter's rule as Alpha," Evan said. "Food was hoarded, everyone was on edge, construction projects were abandoned, and Peter himself was a ticking time bomb."

Everyone in the room nodded. We could all recall how difficult it had been to exist in a pack that was run by a selfish, paranoid Alpha, and we'd had to endure it for months.

"Then you all will understand the way things have gone for the Kings. Ever since Troy took over, the Kings have been suffering. The man has done nothing but accuse wolves of being traitors left and right without any evidence. He then challenges these so-called traitors, but before the challenge can take place, Troy and his closest wolves beat him within an inch of his life."

"So they're no match for him by the time the challenge happens," Kai said, his voice dripping with disgust. "The coward."

Evan nodded. "He's doing this to show the pack that he's powerful, but all he's done is sink pack morale. The only members of the pack who are doing alright are those who were already in Redwolf's favor. Everyone else is struggling to stay alive at this point. Wolves are trying to leave, but that's hard to do when Troy keeps his own pack under constant surveillance. Women, children, it doesn't matter. If they try to leave, he wants them either killed or captured for interrogation."

"Damn," I said. I hated hearing how the innocent members of the Kings pack were suffering, but this would make it all the better when we took Troy down. His people would want someone better to lead them. "Do you think they would support a change in leadership?"

"Absolutely," Evan said. "The pack has always had some semblance of

respect for the Redwolves because at least the pack was prosperous. They believed that Troy would continue in his father's footsteps, but obviously that hasn't happened. Troy's run out of all the goodwill his family name had, so yeah, I think they're eager for new leadership."

"Why would he attack his own men?" Redford asked.

Evan shrugged. "He's always been a little...off, but he hasn't been the same since Gregor died. It's like he's been let off his leash, and no one can rein him in."

"Sounds like he's trying to reestablish his Alpha status," I said, the gears in my mind turning. "He probably felt pressure to be just like his old man, to provide in the same way, but he hasn't earned the respect that Gregor had. So he wants to prove to the pack that he's the strongest to compensate for that."

"The only way he knows how to rule is through fear," Dom said.

I nodded. "He's also probably trying to weed out those he thinks are weak so he can try to take us down."

"I see what you're saying." Evan scratched his chin. There was a five o'clock shadow growing along his jaw. "Troy has been snapping at just about anyone and has shifted and killed countless fighters from his own pack, especially in the last few days. He walks around like a fucking maniac, and even his usual group of followers are avoiding him. Well, aside from Harlon and Samson."

The changing dynamics of the Kings pack meant that the information Bryn had given me before wouldn't work for us now. Evan's being here was perfect timing. Without him, I risked going in blind.

"Our priority should be to rescue Bryn and Tavi," I announced. "I'll deal with Troy after they're safe."

"But taking the Kings over is still part of the plan, right?" Kai asked.

I felt a flash of annoyance, but I quickly tamped that down. I couldn't get frustrated with my own people for asking clarifying questions. "Of course. The plan hasn't changed, we're just taking a slight detour. Once Tavi and Bryn are safe, I'll kill the fucker, and the Kings pack will be ours." As I finished speaking, the room began to spin.

I steadied myself by placing my fingertips on the table. My body was growing weaker by the day, which made our window for making all this happen much tighter. If we didn't find Bryn and Tavi soon, I'd be too weak to win against Troy.

"Are you alright, Night?" Kai asked.

“I’m fine. Thanks.”

Thinking of Bryn made my wolf whine, and I felt an echoing ache in my chest. Bryn. I missed her so fucking much, I could hardly stand it.

I pushed away from the table and addressed Evan. “What about Bryn and Tavi?” I asked. “Has there been any talk of where Redwolf is keeping them?”

Evan shook his head. “I’ve tried to look around, but it’s impossible to dig too deep because of Troy’s state of mind as of late. There have been talks of him coming for you, Night, but no plans have been shared with us yet.”

Dammit! I resisted the urge to take out my frustration on the table. Evan’s intel on the Kings was vital, but his lack of information about my mate and my sister almost rendered that intel useless. My own trackers hadn’t found a trace of them because their scents had been too closely mixed up with Troy’s and the other wolves’.

We weren’t going to give up. I knew in my bones that Bryn was still alive, but I had no idea how long that would last. I hoped against hope that Tavi was with her, too, and that she was safe.

“If he’s so unhinged, maybe now’s the time to strike,” Vince said. “He won’t be expecting it if he’s this unbalanced.”

“No, that won’t work,” I said, almost snapping at the young hunter. “Just because he seems insane doesn’t mean that he’s an idiot. He’s paranoid and unhinged, but that can work to his advantage, too. For all we know, he might already be thinking ten steps ahead of us.” I shook my head. “We can’t underestimate him at all, and we need to be prepared for anything that he might throw our way.”

The silence that followed my words was deafeningly sober. The Wargs were still on our back foot here, and we needed to shape up if we wanted to be on equal footing with the Kings again.

“Night,” Evan was the first to break the silence. “You talking about your mate has got me thinking about something I saw this morning.”

“What is it?”

“It’s not uncommon to see Troy walking around the territory splattered with blood, but today was different. I hadn’t seen Troy for a while until this morning, shortly before I left the Kings compound. His hair and his clothes were a mess, and there was blood all over his hands and on his shirt. Usually the blood on him smells vaguely familiar, like someone in the pack, but I knew this blood wasn’t from any wolf that I’ve met.”

My wolf reacted before I did. The table split right down the middle before

I knew what I'd done. As the wood came apart, sending splinters and sawdust through the room, rage blazed through me. In the seconds that followed—seconds that would have seen me letting my wolf take control and wreak fucking havoc—I wrested control back.

The room was still, everyone watching me with wide eyes. The only one among them who didn't seem surprised was Dom, who stared knowingly, stoically, at me. He alone fully understood the toll that this had taken on his Alpha.

I walked around the mess to stand in front of the group. I towered over them, showing myself to be every bit the commanding presence my weakening power had prevented me from becoming.

"It's time to stop talking and start acting," I said. "Gather the others here. I want this room filled with my best fighters. We're finalizing a plan of action tonight because tomorrow, we're getting them back."

Dom nodded. He and the others filed out of the room, which left me alone again, though it wouldn't last long.

I looked at the ruined table and closed my eyes. I had built this table a decade ago, and now it lay ruined at my feet. I hoped that this wasn't a sign of things to come.

BRYN

In my dream, Night and I were together. Finally. We were naked, and the sensation of his skin brushing against mine, already hot and dewy with sweat, was pleasurable on its own, but I knew there was more gratification to come.

We sat together in what felt like a leather chair. I sat sideways in his lap, kissing him, tasting the love and passion on his tongue, devouring it like he was a home-cooked meal. His hands were everywhere—my hips, my sides, my back. Fire trailed in the wake of his touch.

He sucked my bottom lip into his mouth, holding it gently between his teeth. At the same time, one of his hands found the coveted heat between my thighs, and I cried out, breaking the kiss so I could gasp for breath.

“Night...” I moaned, burying my hands in his thick, silken hair. “Yes!”

He kissed my cheek, my jaw, my chin, and each press of his lips grew more insistent. He sucked at my throat, the sting heightening the electric pleasure as his thumb circled my clit. I threw my head back, but his hand on my back kept me sitting upright. I spread my legs wider for him as he continued to leave love bites along my skin. One bite could be the thing that finished me. It could make me whole again. If only he would sink his fangs in me.

At the thought of being truly his, my orgasm ignited every nerve ending, and pure, hot ecstasy stretched out from my core and unfurled through every inch of my body. I shuddered beneath him in the aftershock of it. His eyes were all I could make out in the darkness, bright green with hunger and passion.

But he still hadn't bitten me.

"Night, please," I begged. "Finish me."

He chuckled, but I didn't want him to laugh, I wanted him to claim me.

I adjusted my position in his lap so I was straddling him. His thick, hard cock pressed between us as I leaned forward to kiss him, my body still tingling from my orgasm. My breasts were flush against him, my hardened nipples brushing against his firm chest. His cock throbbed against my stomach, slick with precum, eager to stretch and fill me.

"Bryn," he growled against my lips, his clawed hands running up and down my back. The faint pain of the scratches only elevated my desire. As if he knew that, he dipped his hands lower and gripped my ass with those hands, lifting me and pressing his tip to my opening. "Mine," he whispered.

"Yours," I returned, and sank lower, eliciting a hissing moan from him. Now bite me and prove it, I willed.

He pushed me down, and at the same time, thrust upward. I cried out as he stretched me. His lips were on my neck again, his fangs dimpling the skin. He stoked the need burning inside me with those first thrusts, and my next orgasm came chasing after the first. I tumbled into it. I knew this was heaven even as my body burned like it was in flames.

"It's time," he growled, his sharp teeth drawing blood. I felt a hot drop of it trail down my throat and between my breasts. Finally, I would be his, and he would leave the mark that would prove it. With just a bit more pressure, his fangs would pierce me, and the claiming would be complete.

"Yes!" I cried, seconds from the claiming bite, but he suddenly pulled away. His body shuddered as he came. He leaned back in the chair, satisfied, but I was left trembling and wanting. I'd orgasmed twice, but I was incomplete and unfinished. That disappointment was a hole in my heart, one that would fester until it found fulfillment.

"Why didn't you do it?" I asked him. "You were seconds from claiming me, but you wouldn't."

Instead of answering, he started to chuckle again, patting my back like I was a child who needed to be comforted and appeased.

"Night, talk to me. Don't you love me?"

But he didn't speak. He just continued to coddle me. I wanted to push out of his arms as tears pricked my eyes, but he held fast.

"Let me go! Let—"

I WOKE with stinging tears in my eyes, my body throbbing with the memory of Night's touch. Around me was darkness as thick and impenetrable as my dream. It took me several seconds to catch my breath, to return to my body. Eventually, the press of the jagged rock against my back and the cool, damp air reminded me where I was.

There was a slight sting at my neck. As I shifted around, I realized the cave wall had been scraping at the area where Night's teeth had pressed to my throat. There was indeed a bead of blood that had welled up from the puncture wound and dripped down my neck.

"Sweet dream?"

I flinched and looked toward the entrance of the cave. Troy leered down at me with a smirk on his face and hunger in his gaze.

Fuck. I sat up straighter. If not for the rock at my back, I would have tried to scoot away from him. I knew that look—it reminded me of when he had me strung up in his room in only my underwear, when he'd told me that I would be his sex slave.

"It looked like you were having a good time," he said.

"That's none of your fucking business," I snapped. I risked taking my eyes off him so I could see if Tavi was nearby, but she was still gone.

When I looked back at Troy, he had moved closer. He crouched in front of me so that we were at eye level.

"Where's Tavi?" I demanded.

"She's the last thing you should be thinking about right now, Bryn." He touched my hair, letting it slip through his fingers. "Why don't you focus on answering a question for me? How does it feel knowing you've given yourself to a man who has no intention of being with you?"

"What?" I blurted, before I could stop myself.

He continued touching my hair, and leaned a bit closer. "I mean, it's obvious that you've let Night fuck you, yet I see no claiming mark on your neck." He touched my throat, trailing his fingertips over my skin. His touch, his very presence, cooled whatever was left of the fire that dream of Night had kindled in my body. "Clearly, he meant to use you for a decent fuck or two before letting you go."

"You have no idea what you're talking about." My voice was a growl. My wolf snapped inside me, wanting Troy's blood on her fangs. I tried to keep it together. I knew that he wanted to get me riled up, wanted to psych me out and get into my head, but his words could never taint the bond that

Night and I shared.

“If you two are truly mates, he should have claimed you. This is proof that he doesn’t love you—he just wanted to toy around with your body and to get back at me. You really are as worthless as I thought, if even my moron of a brother can see it.”

My upper lip curled with disgust. “I don’t know why Night hasn’t claimed me yet, but I know that finding out is as simple as asking him. That’s what love is, Troy. It’s trust, communication, kindness. But I wouldn’t expect you to understand that.” I knew my eyes had started to glow when I felt a push of power from somewhere deep within me. The power came from the part of me that knew without a doubt that my love for Night was genuine. “Night will always be a better Alpha and the better choice, Troy. Even your sadistic father knew that he was the superior wolf.”

Troy growled, gripping a handful of my hair and yanking me close. He snarled into my face, “A bitch like you will never get Night’s mark. You will bear mine.”

All my courage left with those words. “N-no! You can’t!”

But it was too late. His teeth had already sharpened into wolf’s fangs. He forced my head to the side until my joints cracked with pain and sank his teeth roughly into my throat.

My scream echoed through the caves. It felt like Troy was injecting venom straight into my veins, emulsifying my blood and guts together in one terrible mash. It *burned*. I couldn’t push him off. And then I felt Troy’s wolf reaching out to mine. My screams became shrieks as his wolf drew closer.

But my wolf was having fucking none of this. The moment his wolf neared, she turned on him, her own fangs bared. My wolf fought his off, using every bit of strength we had to beat him back until we formed a barrier between us so thick, nothing could penetrate it.

Finally, Troy violently pushed himself away from me, his anger and frustration reaching its peak. I fell back against the cave wall, relieved that his attempt to mark me hadn’t worked, even as what remained of my strength drained from my body and sank into the ground. I’d heard stories from Mom about Alphas from the old days, before there were rules in place for how they should behave. They could force a mating claim onto a female wolf without the need for sex or consent.

Those stories had always disturbed me. The fact that an Alpha would be able to steal another wolf’s mate from him by biting her first and forcing a

claiming bond on her just seemed like the ultimate violation to both the wolves involved and to the greater pack. How could a pack trust an Alpha who felt he could take whatever and *whoever* he wanted at a moment's notice? I was glad that the behavior was forbidden now, but that hadn't stopped Troy.

I had been human when I heard those stories. Now, I knew that my wolf was strong enough to resist such a thing. *Thank every pack mother.*

But my relief was short-lived. As Troy paced back and forth like a caged animal, my blood gushed in worrying rivulets down my chest and back. It soaked into my shirt, and I wasn't breathing so much as gulping for air. I knew somehow that I wasn't dying, even though he had bitten me like he did Violet. Flashes of intense, burning pain throbbed through my body from my neck, but I was conscious, I was breathing. Still, something was wrong with me. His bite—it had put something inside me, something that didn't belong.

“Why?” Troy whirled on me, his hands already forming into tight fists. “Why aren't I good enough for you, bitch? *Why?*”

He fell on me with kicks and punches. Nowhere on my body was safe—head, stomach, and legs were all fair game. His beating was so severe that my body started to go numb until eventually, I was only dimly aware of the blows. But the ache in my neck persisted through the numbness. I could make out Troy's voice as he yelled at me.

“Bitch! You bitch! I'll fucking *destroy* Night Shepherd!” And then, a bit later, I heard, “I'll tear your whore of a friend into pieces. I'll send the pieces to Night, and then I'll kill him in front of you and make you my fucking slave!”

The things he was saying were too awful, so I turned inward, retreating to my subconscious where I could rest. As I lay there, curled in on myself, I felt another presence and a sensation, something like a wet nose pressing into my arm. My wolf. She and I held each other tight in the relative safety of my own mind, waiting for Troy to finally run out of steam and leave.

BRYN

Hours later, I woke up in pain so complete that I couldn't so much as breathe without sending pangs of agony pulsing through my bones. My clothes were plastered to my skin with a mixture of old sweat and sticky, drying blood.

I opened my eyes once, only to quickly squeeze them shut again. It was dark in the cave, but staring into that blackness made my head pound. I whimpered in the dark quiet and waited until the pounding ache was more manageable.

Eventually, I opened my eyes a second time, and I immediately caught sight of Tavi sitting against the wall across from me. Excitement and relief at seeing my friend alive was quickly tempered by the fact that Tavi's face was swollen, and her left eye was bruised black. Her arms were covered in scratches and the imprints of fingers. I could only guess at the full extent of Tavi's injuries, hidden as they were beneath her clothes.

"T-Tavi," I called.

My rough voice made her flinch, but she relaxed when she realized it was me. "Oh, Bryn, you're alive?" A tear slipped from her good eye before she turned and wiped it away with her shoulder. "There was so much blood, I thought you were...I mean, I couldn't be sure. I called your name, but you didn't react, and I thought Troy might've..." She let that sentence trail off, unable to complete the thought. Her gaze was haunted and distant even in the darkness.

"I'm sorry I scared you, Tavi. And I'm sorry that Harlon and Samson hurt you." Now that I'd started apologizing again, the tears came back in full

force. “I’m sorry, Tavi. I’m so, so sorry. I never imagined that any of this would happen. Troy told me that he’s doing all of this to hurt Night and me. You *never* should have been involved in this at all.”

If I hadn’t gone to Violet’s cabin to talk about my insecurities about Night, if I’d just stayed with Night and talked it out with him, would any of this have happened? Would Troy have left Violet, Tavi, and Pax alone to deal with Night and me directly? Maybe Night would have had enough time to claim me, and Troy’s hope of weakening him would have been crushed before he touched me. And Night would have had him handled.

“Bryn, don’t do this to yourself,” Tavi’s voice pulled me from those spiraling *could-have-been*’s. “I can see you trying to blame yourself, but you haven’t done anything wrong.”

“But—”

She shook her head. Her hair, once beautiful and flowing, had grown stiff with dust and blood. “It’s not your fault, Bryn. It’s not. You shouldn’t have even an ounce of guilt about what we’re going through.”

“I’m sorry.” I squeezed my eyes shut to stop the tears from flowing. The salt stung as they passed over the scratches on my face and soaked into my hair. Why did every part of me have to hurt so much?

Tavi took a few deep breaths and straightened her spine, though it looked like it hurt. It was as if she was gathering herself up, hardening again. “You have nothing to apologize for.” Her voice was stronger now. “How are you doing?”

“To be honest, I don’t know.” I sniffled. “Everything hurts, b-but my neck is the worst of it.” The ache was terrible, though that side of my body had started to go numb. The *wrongness* of it was the worst part. The other aches and scratches would heal with time, but this wound felt like it might never go away.

“Can I see?” Tavi asked. “If you can turn your head a bit...”

I turned my head to show her the wound.

“That motherfucker,” Tavi whispered. The quiet horror in her voice sent chills through me. “He gave you an Alpha wound.”

My eyes widened. “A what?”

“He basically branded you with his will. It’ll take forever for that to heal, and without treatment, it’ll get worse long before it gets better.”

“Great,” I muttered. “How long?”

“I’m not sure, I’ve only read about this in books. If I had to guess, I think

it'll take days, maybe weeks." Tavi shook her head. "Damn, damn, damn. I should've been here with you. I shouldn't have—" She cut herself off with another sharp shake of her head. "What could I have even done?" she asked herself in a bitter whisper. Her lips, like mine, were dry and cracked, and when she scowled, it caused her bottom lip to split. Fresh blood dripped down her chin. "We need to get the hell out of here. Waiting for someone to rescue us is out of the question now."

"I know, but how? We've been trying to get out of these shackles for days."

We stopped to think for a few minutes. I felt so weak, I knew I would never be able to break through the cuffs at this point. And given the way Tavi looked, I doubted she would have much better luck. We had been left to starve, without water or food, and with the beatings we'd suffered, we had only gotten weaker.

"If we can get Troy pissed off enough, he might unshackle one of us long enough to go on the offensive."

"Do you really think that will work?"

"I don't know, Bryn," Tavi snapped. "At least it's *something*, right?"

I fell silent. Tavi had never ever snapped or gotten frustrated with me before, but even that slight pushback had been enough to irk her.

Tavi winced. "Fuck, Bryn, I'm so sorry. I don't know what's wrong with me."

"No, it's okay," I told her.

"It's not. I haven't felt like myself since..." She shook her head again. "Never mind. I should have kept my head at the beginning. Maybe we wouldn't have been separated." She released a long sigh. "How's your neck, Bryn? Does it burn?"

I nodded. "Yeah. Feels like someone's hitting me in the neck with a blowtorch."

"Wolves who have been claimed have a slightly easier time with Alpha bites. The wound doesn't burn for them, but your soulmate was a fucking idiot and didn't claim you in time."

Tavi's sudden mention of Night made my wolf bristle. I was tempted to defend my man, but the word Tavi used distracted me. "Soulmates?"

Tavi snorted, and for a precious moment, it was like she'd returned to her old self. "What? All those romance novels you read, and you've never heard the term?"

I chuckled but cut myself off with a wince. Laughing made my wounds even more painful. “No, I’ve heard it before. I just...do you think that’s what Night and I are?”

“It’s obvious. The way you two were around each other was so different from other mated wolves. If I’m right, it means that the bond you have with Night is an even tighter and stronger connection than any other mate bond. It’s something rare and precious, but if it’s not claimed, you’ll get increasingly weaker and weaker the longer you go without it. Until one of you eventually...”

“...Dies?” I finished with a shiver.

“Yes. Until that point, it’ll get so bad that you’ll hardly be able to move. That’s why we need to get out of this place asap.”

“Oh...”

That meant the window of my usefulness to Tavi was closing. I already felt so powerless, so defenseless, but with the Alpha wound on top of my unclaimed bond with Night, I would be more of a liability to Tavi than an asset. I could only imagine how awful it must be for Night...

With a sharp shudder, I realized that Night would eventually fight Troy, but if he was getting weaker each day, he might not survive the encounter. I couldn’t fathom losing him.

I had no idea why he hadn’t claimed me. There was a needling voice in the back of my mind telling me that it was because he didn’t love me the way that I loved him, and even my wolf still felt uncertain. I knew that he cared about me, but I wasn’t very strong or brave like Tavi or Night. Maybe there was some hidden code to soulmate bonds that even Tavi didn’t know? Maybe I needed to prove myself to him to show him that I was worthy of the bite? Or maybe there was a specific day that would work better for soulmate claimings?

If either was the case, then why hadn’t anyone told me? I closed my eyes again and tried to breathe through the frustration that had begun to worm its way through my mind. My wolf whined at me and paced. She was uneasy about the places my line of thinking was taking me. I couldn’t be sure what exactly bothered her about it, but I knew she wanted me to stop.

And she was right. Wondering about all this was ultimately pointless. Whether I needed to prove myself or Night had been waiting for a certain date, neither would help me or Tavi right now. I needed to focus on the facts: I was in Troy’s clutches, I was badly wounded, and there was no easy way of

escape. I also knew that I loved Night. No amount of self-doubt or uncertainty could change that.

And I needed to believe in Night and in the certainty of the love we shared if I wanted to last another day.

I wasn't so naïve to think that I was going to walk away from this, especially with all of my injuries. One of the few silver linings to this situation was that I would probably die before Troy got what he wanted from me. But there was still hope for Tavi. I didn't know what had happened to her in the days since we'd been apart, but it was clear that she still had the energy and will to fight. I wasn't planning on dying until I made sure she could get away safely.

"Where did Troy's men take you, Tavi?" I asked.

Tavi hesitated, and then slid her gaze away. "I was moved to another space in the cave. I think I was pretty close to the entrance."

"Do you know how many wolves were around?"

"Besides Troy and the other two wolves, I know of one other wolf."

So that meant there were four wolves total that we had to contend with. All of them were healthy males, and one was an unhinged Alpha. That didn't bode well for us.

"Could you see outside?"

"No, but I could smell the grass, and the Kootenai, and I could hear the birds."

"Do you know how long we've been here?" I'd tried to gauge the time by the amount of light shining through the small hole in the roof of the cave, but after Troy's beatings, I knew my timing was off because of how long I'd spent asleep and recovering.

"Four days," Tavi said quietly. "Bryn, I don't think we'll be able to last another one."

"Neither do I." I forced myself to think. Tavi had suggested we make Troy mad enough to unshackle us. Maybe we could do something a bit different. "Tavi, let's go back to your plan."

"What? Oh! You think it could work?"

"I think trying to get Troy to beat us might send him over the edge. I really thought he was going to kill me this most recent time. Why don't we scare him instead? You could pretend to have a seizure or something, and when he unchains you, you can run away."

She frowned. "I don't think it should be me. They told me that I didn't

matter as much to his plans. So, if either of us should run away, it should be you.”

“No, Tavi. There’s no telling when they’ll come back—it might be too late for me when they do.”

“Bryn, no, you can’t think like that—”

“Tavi, I have to!” Now I was the one snapping. “I don’t like thinking about dying or leaving Night without a mate, but I have to be pragmatic,” I said, my voice cracking at the end. “I have some strength now, but in a day or two, who can say? Even now, I don’t think I’d make it as far as you would. I wish I didn’t have to put this on you, but I don’t think we have a choice.”

She was quiet for a few moments, considering my words. Finally, she nodded. “Okay,” she muttered. “I hear you. I don’t like it, but I hear you.”

“I’m glad we’re on the same page.” I took a deep breath and gathered my emotions. We had something here. Maybe it would work and maybe it wouldn’t, but at least it was something to try. “Okay, I think we should have a sign or something before we start. Maybe I’ll blink three times.”

“That could work—”

Heavy, running footsteps entered the tunnel, the awful sound silencing our plans. Troy, Samson, Harlon, and a fourth man entered the tunnel. Samson and Harlon each had a syringe in their hand.

“Ladies,” Troy said, his voice a sick purr, “let’s all take a trip.”

We screamed as they approached with their needles, but of course, our efforts were in vain. Later, I would only be able to recall hard, rough hands grabbing me and the sting of the needle in the uninjured side of my neck, and nothing more.

NIGHT

My wolves and I stood along the Canadian border in Kings pack territory. It was dark, and crickets and cicadas were lending their voices to the night. The wind whispered through the leaves and between the trunks of the trees and bushes around us, carrying the scent of autumn. Soon, it would be fall, soon the leaves would change and fall to the forest floor, and I was determined to see the season change with Bryn and Tavi by my side.

Though I had a plan in place, though I was surrounded by a dozen members of my pack, I didn't feel better. I wouldn't until I had eyes on my family, until I had Bryn in my arms again.

Along with Dom and the rest of my team, I darted into the thicket of trees, silent as moonlight. Evan had returned to the Kings' compound, and he'd sent a message back to us. He'd learned of a potential location for Bryn and Tavi—a cave near the Kootenai, one that was rarely used because it was out of the way of most foot traffic. The moment I heard the news, we all shifted for the trip.

My wolf and I hadn't been on the best terms, but tonight, we were in sync. We both believed without a doubt that Bryn would soon be with us again; we just needed to stay strong a bit longer. I was glad that Dom had convinced me to bring so many wolves. I preferred to go in as stealthily as possible, but I didn't want to take unnecessary chances with Troy.

Soon, we reached the mouth of the cave. We all crouched low in our wolf forms, approaching the cave without so much as a snapped twig or a crushed leaf. As we neared the entrance, I smelled Bryn. Her sweet, earthy scent was

like the most intoxicating perfume. It made my wolf vibrate with pleasure. She was here. She had to be!

But there were no wolves guarding the cave. Despite Bryn's scent, it seemed abandoned. *They couldn't be on break or in between shifts. Troy wouldn't be so stupid as to leave the girls unguarded...* The thought sent a sharp stab of dread through me that pinned me to the spot. Bryn and Tavi weren't here.

"*This doesn't look good, Night,*" Dom said, speaking through our telepathic bond. "*He must've moved them already.*"

"*We should investigate the cave.*" I wasn't just speaking to Dom, but to all of my wolves. This was easier to do in my wolf form, but my Alpha powers weren't coming to me as naturally as they usually did. "*There might be some indication of where Redwolf took them.*"

Two of my men stood outside the cave while the rest of us entered. Tavi and Bryn's scents were all over the walls, as well as Troy's. But there was no sign of the girls. All we found were traces of blood splatter and shackles left in the cave walls. The sight made Dom and I tremble and growl with rage, and the rest of my wolves, too. They had known Tavi as long as I had, and Bryn had easily endeared herself to them. The girls were their family, too, and none of us took this most recent failure lightly.

Finally, we forced ourselves to leave. Staying in the cave would only make us angrier, and there were no clues to where Troy would have taken them. As we neared the entrance, I reached out to my men outside.

"*How's it look out there?*" I waited, but didn't receive a response. I glanced at Dom, who met my gaze with a grave look of his own. *Shit.*

We upped the pace, bursting from the cave to find Troy standing in his human form with two dozen wolves backing him. The wolves we'd left as sentinels lay bloody at Troy's feet, but they were still breathing.

I shifted to my human form, but Dom and the rest of my team remained in their wolf forms. Dom stuck close to my side as I walked toward Troy, ready to jump in at a moment's notice.

"I can't say I'm happy to see you, Night," Troy said. I wished so very badly that I could rip the smirk right off the prick's face.

"Where are Bryn and Octavia?" I demanded.

"You just missed them. I took them to a secure location because, you see, I was enjoying Bryn far too much to just let her go back to you." His tongue ran over his lips and his canines, which were sharper than usual. "You know,

I've never tasted blood so sweet. I had a filling meal for dinner, and then I had Bryn for dessert."

I growled before I could stop myself. Damn him. *Damn* him. "I'll make sure you pay for every mark on her before I kill you, Troy."

"Ohh. I'm shaking. You pose such a large threat with just a handful of men behind you."

Every cell in my body urged me to attack Troy, but I forced myself to stay still. I needed to play this smart, or I risked not only Tavi and Bryn, but the rest of my wolves as well. I was weak, and I shouldn't push things now with all of Troy's wolves backing him up. *Don't let him get a rise out of you. Focus.*

"It's obvious that you want something," I said. "So what is it?"

Troy gave an exaggerated pout, like a child disappointed that an adult wasn't playing his stupid game. "I just want the chance to kill you, Night."

I looked around and held out my arms. "There's no better opportunity than right now, Redwolf. Why not settle this now?"

He tilted his head. "How like you, Night. Always pretending to be the big bad wolf, when the loss of a woman is enough to bring you to your knees."

I remembered the day I'd rescued Bryn. I had knocked him flat on his ass and I'd very nearly killed him then. If I could go back, I would have taken the opportunity to end Troy's life.

"Too scared that I'll embarrass you in front of your men, Troy? In a fair, one-on-one fight?"

"Not at all, but you Wargs have a tendency of surviving no matter how often your betters try to squash you. You're more like cockroaches than wolves."

A few of my wolves growled low, but they quieted as I lowered my arms. "Doesn't that say more about you, then? If you can't take care of a few cockroaches, how could you be able to run a pack?"

His eye twitched. "You want your whores back, don't you? If so, then you'll fucking *listen* to me."

Dom gnashed his teeth, digging his claws into the ground. He was about to take a step toward Troy, but I shot my hand out to stop him.

"You're a coward and a piece of shit, Troy. The Kings are the dominant pack in the area, and still you let them suffer under your leadership. You're even worse than your fuckhead of a father—" I paused, and then smirked. "Sorry, I guess I should say *our* fuckhead of a father."

A ripple of shock and confusion spread through Troy's men. His wolves glanced at each other, at Troy, and finally at me. They were putting together the puzzle pieces in real time.

Troy's face turned puce. "Fuck you, Night!" he snarled, taking a step forward. "You're nothing but a bastard, and your mother is a whore. I'm the *only* son of Gregor!"

I let Troy continue his tirade, the smirk still on my face. It had only taken a small push to get him to this state, to make him look like a fool in front of his own men.

"Fuck you," he said again. "You think you're the one in control here, but you're not. *I'm* the one who's got Bryn and your sister. If you want either of them to see the light of day again, then you'll fight me in the ring in front of my pack, and you will lose."

"Fuck that. I'll fight you and win."

"No. You didn't let me finish." He'd recovered from his tirade enough that he could sneer at me. "We'll fight, but if you win, I'll have my men kill both of them. If you lose, I vow to my men and yours now that I'll let them go back to your pack"

"What?" I snapped. A similarly horrified ripple spread through my team. "That's fucking ridic—"

"If you don't agree to the challenge, I'll give that she-wolf over to my men to be whored out and mated. I'll have Bryn myself. She'll do well keeping my bed warm."

White-hot fury boiled through my body, and I knew Dom and the others felt the same. We all wanted to kill the fucker right then and there, but we still had no idea where Tavi and Bryn were. Troy said they were in a secure location; he probably kept close contact with the men guarding them. If we killed him now, it was possible his men had orders to kill them. I couldn't risk that.

"*Night, you can't!*" That was Dom, but I heard the thoughts of others who were against this as well.

I didn't answer them. What Troy was suggesting was the very definition of cowardly and sick, but what other choice did I have?

"Show me proof that they're still alive," I said.

"Doesn't your weakness prove that she's still around?"

I growled, my teeth sharpening. "Show me. Now."

Troy gave me that shit-eating smirk. He reached into his pocket. My

wolves and I tensed...until Troy revealed a smartphone. He called someone and put them on speaker.

“*Alpha Redwolf*,” a male voice answered.

“Show me.” Troy waited a few seconds and then showed me the screen.

I stepped closer, my heart beating hard in my chest. The video showed Bryn and Tavi lying next to each other on the ground. They were unconscious and covered in injuries, their clothes were in tatters, and their hair was knotted with dirt and blood. They looked like they’d barely survived hell. The sight of them made me sick to my stomach, but they were alive.

“I’ll pay you back a hundred times for each injury,” I swore. I was so angry, my ears were ringing.

Troy snorted. “No, you won’t.” He ended the call and slipped the phone back into his pocket. “You have twenty-four hours to make your decision, Night.”

“I don’t know if you understand, Troy. I am making a promise to you now that I will make your death a slow and painful one.”

Troy chuckled. “I’m the one with all the power here, Night, like I’ve always had. You’d be smart to remember that. And by the way? I win whether you accept this or not. When you’re dead, your pack and your land are as good as mine.”

Without another word, Troy shifted and ran with his men—back to the Kings’ compound or to the girls, I didn’t know which. But once again, we were going home empty-handed.

NIGHT

I paced in the living room of my cabin. Both Dom and Mom were there with me. I'd just finished telling Mom about the meeting and the details of Troy's deal. I was waiting for her to digest the information and give her opinion, but in the meantime, I couldn't sit still. My wolf was the same, treading back and forth inside me, just as eager to get out and do something.

Mom was sitting in the armchair, her fingers rubbing absently at the bandage that covered the Alpha wound. She was still dealing with the effects of it on the fifth day since Troy's attack, but according to Dr. Stan, she was doing better than all of his best predictions.

Suddenly, she burst into a string of curses and launched out of her chair. I stopped pacing to watch her take up my rhythm, walking back and forth between the walls. Dom moved away from the wall and reached for her, but she waved away his helping hand. I crossed my arms over my chest and waited for her to say something that wasn't just a curse on Troy's head.

Finally, she said, "Night, you can't do this. It's suicide."

"I don't want to do it, but he has Bryn and Tavi."

"But you won't survive it."

It stung to hear her say that, but she was right. Agreeing to the plan meant agreeing to die by Troy's hands. If I was being honest, I would have told her that I'd never felt weaker or more sluggish than I did then. I was sure that I could have killed Troy yesterday in a one-on-one fight—I was certainly angry enough to do it after seeing Bryn and Tavi—but I wasn't as confident now.

"I don't have a choice at this point. I have to bring them home."

“But you know that Troy isn’t an honorable man. He’s not going to give them back to you even if you lose.”

“I know. That’s why fighting him is only part of the plan.” I glanced at Dom.

He looked away from me, his face pinched tight with fury. I had already discussed this with him, and he hated my plan.

“I’ll show up for the challenge,” I explained, “but I’ll have wolves searching for the girls. I’ll stall during the fight. I’ll let Redwolf believe that I’m falling in line with the plan. But when I get word that they’re safe, at that point, I’ll kill the fucker.”

Mom frowned. I could see the questions already forming on her brow, and I let her ask them. “What if you die during the fight? What if you end up killing each other? What then?”

“Then Dominic will take over the pack,” I said, nodding to my beta. “If I die, I die.”

Dom said nothing, just continued to scowl at the ground.

Mom was quiet as she considered my plan. After several moments, she let out a long, deep sigh and seemed to release most of her anger. She reached up for my face, and I bent so that her hands could touch me. Her fingers were warm, rough with age and with work, and soothing against my skin.

“My boy,” she said gently, “it’s really, really not easy hearing you say these things. When you were a little boy, it just about broke my heart every time you came home with a bruise, though I knew you had to experience those things to grow up. When you fought Peter and the other wolves to become Alpha, I wished I could feel every blow in your stead, so that I could keep you safe.” She ran her fingers through my hair. “I know I haven’t been the most tender of mothers to you, that I had to raise you to be strong to face the struggles that I knew were headed your way, but I’ve only wanted your happiness.”

I briefly closed my eyes. Her words penetrated deep in me, achingly sweet. “You are a great mother,” I assured her. “I wouldn’t be the man I am without you.”

“And don’t I know it.” She smiled and ruffled my hair. “I know how far you will go for Bryn. It would be stupid of me to fault you for choosing her life over yours. There’s no shame in fighting for love, but remember that Troy is evil, and evil men never fight fair. He’s definitely up to something more than you or I can see.”

When she lowered her hands, I stepped back. I glanced at the wall clock. In about ten minutes, I was due to explain my plan to the rest of my team. “I agree. I’ll be as careful as I can be, and we’ll have backup plans in place to make sure Bryn and Tavi are safe.”

“I suppose that’s all I can ask for.” She gave me a sad smile. “I love you, Night.”

“I love you, too.” I hugged her tight, and then left with Dom to head over to the conference room.

We entered the mess hall and walked to the conference room door. The table I’d broken had been removed from the room and converted to a pair of benches. Our current table was unvarnished oak. The surface was sanded, but it would need to be treated with wax to be of any long-term use.

Dom, who had remained uncharacteristically quiet during the conversation with Mom and through most of the walk, turned to me once he’d closed the door behind us. We were alone for now, but the others would be arriving soon.

“Night, I just want you to know that I’ll be with you to the end. I swear it.”

“No.” I looked at him. “I’m sorry, Dom, but you’re too important to the plan. You need to be the one who goes in to get the girls.”

He shook his head, but I started speaking again before he could argue.

“I’ll keep Troy and the audience busy. I’ll give them a show. You’ll only have to deal with the sons of bitches who are holding the girls. When I get the signal that they’re safe, I’ll complete the plan. If the worst happens and Troy kills me before I can kill him, you need to be alive to make sure he’s dead.”

Dom’s lip twitched. “I hate this. Everything about this makes my skin fucking crawl. What if you need me?”

“Dom, listen to me. The moment Troy and I start fighting, I won’t matter to you anymore. You’ve been a great friend, and an even better beta; I know it goes against everything in you to leave me to the fight, but you have to do this. Bryn and Tavi are more important. You’re the only man I can trust to do this. You know that.”

I knew that Dom felt the truth of my words, but I also knew that it wouldn’t make the situation any easier for him to accept. I didn’t like forcing this on him, but the stakes were too damned high.

“How will I ever live with myself?” Dom asked quietly. “How can I be the Alpha after you?”

“I won’t lie and say that it’ll be easy, Dom, and I’m sorry about that. But you’ll manage because you have to.” The path that every Alpha takes is hard and bloody. Every one of us has to live with the memories of the people we kill or leave behind. Some of us deal with the pressure more easily.

Dom closed his eyes. I wanted to say more, but the door opened and the others began filing in. We would have to save the rest of the conversation for later, but as far as I was concerned, this was final.

Once everyone was seated, I explained the plan. When I finished, I let the group consider in silence until Redford spoke up.

“Alpha, this is too risky,” he said. “There’s so much that could go wrong. We should come up with something better.”

“I’m not ready for you to stop being Alpha,” William added. William had been injured in the initial siege on the Kings, when I’d first rescued Bryn. “I’ve seen how other packs are, I’ve seen their Alphas, and frankly, I don’t see how anyone could replace you. No offense, Dom.”

Dom chuckled. “No offense taken, Will. I’m right there with you.”

“I agree with William,” Frankie, a female wolf, spoke up. Since Troy killed Iggy weeks ago, she and Rachel were the only women in my inner circle. I hoped more female wolves would feel comfortable stepping up after the packs merged. “Losing you would be a huge blow to the pack. Most of us remember what it was like before you. Many of us won’t want to risk a return to old times. In other words,” she looked at me pleadingly, “you’re too much of an asset, Night.”

It warmed me to hear them say all of these things. Their words were a kindness that I struggled to feel like I deserved, but in the end, they wouldn’t change my mind. I placed my hands on the table and looked from face to face.

“I understand your concerns, but we’ve run out of time. If any of you have an alternative strategy, speak now.”

The room was silent. That was the real issue. I knew that my plans weren’t as thorough or as well thought out as they normally were, but with only twenty-four hours, this was the best I or anyone else could come up with. I didn’t want to die, and I *definitely* didn’t want to lose a fight to a prick like Troy, but my plan required endurance and strength—two things I had in short supply. Putting on a show for the crowd and letting Troy think he was winning would likely sap what little power I had left. I’d have to be an idiot to think that I might survive the fight.

“So, then,” I said, “with that settled, I want word sent to Troy that we are accepting the challenge. While that’s happening, I want trackers to start scenting for Bryn and Tavi around the cave. Focus not on their scents, but on Troy’s. That should lead us right to the girls.”

“I’ll oversee that myself,” Dom said. “When they have the location, I’ll tell them to hold.”

“Good. The only thing we’ve got working in our favor is Troy’s arrogance. He’ll want everyone in his pack watching the challenge take place; that means there will be fewer wolves paying attention to what’s going on outside the ring, and there will be a minimum of guards keeping watch over Bryn and Octavia.”

Dom nodded. “I’ll take a dozen of our best fighters with me. I don’t want another surprise waiting for us like last time.”

It was nice to hear that Dom was starting to get more comfortable with my plan, that he seemed to be accepting (albeit reluctantly) his role in it.

A hand shot up, and I focused on its owner. Jasper, the boy who had tried to court Bryn when she first arrived, stood up.

“I volunteer to stay with Alpha Night,” he said. “I’ll signal to him once I get word that they’re safe.” He hesitated, glancing at me. “If that’s alright with you, Alpha?”

I had to fight back traces of jealousy and annoyance when I looked at Jasper. My wolf still seethed when he was close. I was tempted to refuse because I knew the boy was still interested in Bryn, but that interest would work in her favor. The more people who cared about my mate on my team, the safer she would ultimately be.

“That’s fine with me.” I nodded. “Alright, everyone, if there are no more questions, I want you all to get home and get some rest. We’re hours away from go time.”

Everyone began to disperse, murmuring quietly to each other, but I motioned for Dom to stay behind for a moment.

“Dom, I need you to promise me that you’ll get Bryn and Tavi back to Wargs’ territory. I don’t care what you have to do or who you have to kill, understand?”

He hesitated at first, but ultimately, he agreed. “I give you my word as your beta that I will get Bryn and Tavi home safe.”

I pulled Dom in for a brief hug. “Thank you.” When we separated, I sent Dom to his cabin alone so I could walk home by myself.

In sharp contrast to the darkness of the situation, it was a gorgeous day. The sky was a creamy, azure blue, the clouds were fluffy and white, and it was the perfect temperature for a long walk. I took in the sounds of the pack—the chatter of adults and the delighted squeals of children. The air smelled of sweet mirth and joy and simple pleasure. At present, the Wargs pack was happy, and I tried to savor that. For all I knew, it could be one of the last times I experienced it.

I arrived at my cabin and headed straight to my bedroom. Mom wasn't there; she'd probably gone to speak to the Elders or check on her garden. Either way, I was grateful for the time alone.

I sat on the bed and picked up Bryn's favorite pillow. I held it to my face, inhaling her scent. My wolf sighed, calming for the first time in hours. Her scent did wonders for my peace of mind, but it wasn't anywhere as good as having her with me.

"I've only wanted your happiness," Mom had said. But it was what she hadn't said that stuck with me. The truth was, I *had* found happiness. With Bryn. She was my mate, the only person I could see myself being happy with, my dreams made incarnate.

I'd accomplished so much in my life, including finding my soulmate. I still wanted to do so much more, but I had very few regrets about the way I'd lived my life. The thing that haunted me most was losing Bryn and Tavi, and the thought that I might die before I got to see them one more time. I wasn't afraid of dying, and I wasn't scared of losing my life. I was confident that I could kill Troy even at the cost of my own life. But I'd accept that price as long as I made my pack proud and saved Tavi and Bryn.

BRYN

I came to with a groan. I kept my eyes closed as I tried to get rid of the dust and cobwebs that had settled on my mind. Slowly, I recalled Troy, Samson, and Harlon's sudden return to the cave to drug me and Tavi. Again. Whatever they'd injected us with left my body feeling heavy and slow. Then again, it could be that the Alpha wound was taking its toll on me.

Though I was groggy, I immediately noticed a few changes in my surroundings. The wall at my back was no longer jagged, and I couldn't hear the distant sound of the Kootenai or smell the overwhelmingly muggy air.

That told me that I was no longer in the cave. I was lying on cold, concrete ground, and my hands and legs were still bound. This time, my cuffs were connected to the wall. I could be strung up if Troy wanted it.

I gave a tentative wiggle, trying to take inventory of my body, but that was a mistake. I gasped as pain shot through me. If I'd healed while I slept, I hadn't healed enough—my neck still felt like it was on fire, and I ached in places I didn't even know I could. And my ankles and wrists were swollen and sore from having been confined for so long.

At least I was still wearing clothes. They were the gross, dirt-and-blood-caked clothes that I'd been wearing for the last few days, but it was better than being naked in an unfamiliar place. I tried to force my eyes open, but it was a bit of a struggle with the blood and tears dried onto them. I hoped I could live long enough to feel clean again.

When I peeled my eyes apart, I found that I was in the basement of a cabin. It wasn't Troy's; I knew this because there was no trace of his gaudy furniture, and it wasn't reeking with his scent. To my left, there was an old,

wooden staircase leading up, and there was a plain wooden door in the wall across from me. With so few clues, I couldn't tell whose cabin it was.

I turned to my left and found Tavi lying a few feet from me. She was clothed, too, and she was still breathing. Her arms were free, but there was a thick metal collar around her neck. A chain led from the back of the collar to a heavy-duty lock on the ground. The chain stretched for three feet, which didn't leave her a ton of maneuvering room. My stomach turned at the sight. It was the kind of thing you did to a dangerous animal, not a person.

"Tavi, wake up!"

She stirred, the chain shifting slightly against the ground. For a second, her eyes opened, but they were empty and unfocused.

"Bryn?" she whispered. "What's that? Where are we?"

"We're in a cabin, but I don't know where we are. Can you come closer to me? Maybe you could undo these chains?"

She tried to sit up, but the chain was so thick and heavy against her that she couldn't do more than shift around. "I'm sorry. I'm too sleepy." Her speech was slurred.

"Tavi, focus on me." I tried to scoot closer to peer into her eyes.

She shifted a little closer to me too, but her strength gave out just as she reached my knee. Her head fell onto my leg.

"I'll help, I promise, I just...I need to..." The rest of her words became mumbled gibberish, and then her eyes slipped closed.

I wiggled my leg, hoping that would wake her up again. "Wait, wait, wait! Tavi, no! Don't go to sleep!"

Her eyelids twitched and she let out a brief whimper, but again, she lay silent.

I realized with a chill that she was still suffering from the effects of the drug. I had no idea if Tavi and I had received the same dosage or if we'd even received the same sedative. Tavi was alive now, but who knew what could happen in the next few hours? What if she was falling into a coma? What if she choked on her own tongue without ever waking up?

"Tavi, can you hear me?" I spoke more urgently. "Tavi—Octavia? Octavia Black!"

But no matter how much I tried to wake her up, it was useless. After those initial movements, she remained motionless even at the sound of her full name.

That wasn't good. Bitter panic began to mount in my body. The only bit

of relief I felt was that she was more comfortable on my leg than she was lying on the ground. This bit of comfort was the best I could give her, but it wouldn't get us out of harm's way, and it wouldn't protect us.

A sob tore free from my chest as I leaned over her, my hair brushing her face. "Please...I can't do this by myself," I whispered as stinging tears slipped over my cheeks and dripped onto hers. Even then she didn't stir.

I heard a door open above us. Footsteps descended the staircase, and then Troy and a few of his men approached.

"Stay back!" I shouted.

The men ignored me, making a beeline for Tavi. They unlocked her chain before dragging her through the door across from me. A glimpse through the doorway revealed a similarly darkened space, but no further details. I caught one last look of Tavi, her face contorting in pain, before the door slammed shut.

I shrieked after her, straining against my bonds. My wolf raged inside me, both of us keening and screaming after our friend.

"She's hurt!" I looked at Troy. "She could die! Please don't—"

Troy crossed to me and slapped my face hard. "Shut up."

My mouth filled with blood. Desperate rage rose inside me, and I turned to Troy. Before I could think better of it, I spat the blood in his face, the crimson glob hitting his cheek. He grabbed me by my hair and lifted me to eye level. I hadn't thought I'd be capable of feeling more pain, but here it was, electrifying across my scalp.

"If you want to live, you'll learn to respect your Alpha and fall in line like a good whore!"

"You will *never* be my Alpha," I snapped. "I'll die before I accept you."

He let me go and I thudded to the ground on my back. He backed away from me and began walking back and forth in front of the staircase. His restless pacing was happening more and more often. I wondered if he was closer to defeat than I thought.

"You're just like my father," he grumbled to himself. "No matter how hard I try, no matter how much I do, neither of you think I'm good enough. *Nobody* thinks I'm good enough. *I* am the one in control here. Why does no one respect that? My father ruled with control and fear, and people bowed to him. I do the same, but I get nothing. Why?"

"I'm nothing like your father, Troy." I glared at him. "But *you* are no better than him. You're a coward who cheats instead of fighting his own

battles.”

I had no idea what was going on or if I would survive the day, so I just let him have it. What more could he do to me? What other pain could he inflict?

“Just because your father was fucked in the head doesn’t mean you have to be,” I said, glaring at him. “You could have been the better wolf, but you chose to be worse.”

“No! It was *his* fault.” He turned on me. “My father made me this way, and then he tried to rip everything away from me by reminding me about Night. The fucker got sick and then he started feeling guilty about all he’d done to his firstborn. Not to me. He didn’t apologize for any of the shit he put me through. Shepherd was the only one he could talk about. He told me he was going to announce it to everyone when he got better. That Night should always have been his heir, not me.”

I stared at him as he beat his fists against his chest. He was a child throwing a tantrum because his older brother got the toy that he wanted to play with, a poor sport who’d lost at some greater game.

Of course, I didn’t discount the fact that Troy was probably telling the truth about Gregor and how Gregor had treated him throughout his childhood. But nothing excused the way he was acting now. *How was I so afraid of him before? How could I have thought he was anything other than a sniveling, pathetic child in a man’s body?*

“You’re an idiot,” I said, calm stealing over me as he teetered on the edge of losing his mind. “You had the perfect opportunity to prove Gregor and everyone else wrong. You could have been a better man, but now you’re going down in history as the worst Alpha the Kings have ever had.”

“You know *nothing*,” he snapped. “I will go down as a legend. Once Night dies a public death, everyone will know that there is no one left to stop me from creating my own empire. I’ll fucking show *everyone* that I’m the rightful heir, and I’ll combine both packs just to prove it.”

“You’re delusional.” I shook my head. “Under you? Everyone will suffer. It’ll be chaos.”

There was a pause followed by an eerie quiet. “And so what?”

My eyebrows scrunched together. “What do you mean ‘so what?’”

His blank face suddenly parted into a manic grin that was somehow too wide and full of sharp wolf’s teeth. His dark brown hair was coming out of its usual, slick bun, falling around his shoulders in unkempt, unruly strands. “Why should I want the packs to succeed? One of them is loyal to my half-

brother, and the other turned a blind eye to the way my father treated me. Maybe...maybe I'll enjoy watching the packs tear each other apart."

"You're sick," I hissed with dawning horror. "You're *disgusting*. It's only a matter of time before Night kills you. And if he doesn't kill you, then someone else will. You can't destroy these packs, you...you'll—"

Troy threw back his head and laughed, drowning out the rest of my sentence.

I gritted my teeth and wished I had the power to make him collapse right here. I hated knowing that Night was likely at his weakest now, just like I was. I hated that I couldn't do anything to help him or Tavi or even myself. The only thing I could do was *try* to survive, to be alive after Night killed Troy so I could hold him in my arms again. At this rate, I wasn't sure I could do even that much.

Sudden movement from Troy caused my instincts to kick in. I jerked away from him as hard as I could despite the protesting aches in my body. In Troy's hand was something black and small.

I screamed as I realized what it was—a muzzle that was used to prevent shifting. It kept the snout from growing, thus forcing the wolf to stay inside. These days, it was meant to be reserved for use in the most desperate of medical situations only, but it had been created hundreds of years ago. Its original purpose was to subdue and torture, not to heal.

"Get that away from me, you son of a bitch!" I screeched. But still, he drew nearer. "Don't you fucking—don't put it anywhere near me!"

"Time's ticking, Bryn," he said, giggling as he tried to get the muzzle on me. "Soon, you'll be begging me to claim you just to save your life."

"Never! You'll have to kill me before—"

With one deft move, he pulled the muzzle over my head and fit it over my mouth, securing it with the strap at the back. When he was finished, he stepped back and smirked. "When Night is dead, your wolf will be begging for a new mate and she'll claw at the chance to be mated to me, even if you don't want her to." He winked at me. "I'll see you soon, Bryn."

Troy went back up the steps, giggling to himself, leaving me alone, chained up and muzzled like a rabid dog. I fought hard not to cry, not wanting to give Troy or any of his lackeys the satisfaction.

ANOTHER DAY PASSED without me hearing anything, marking day seven since

Troy had taken me and Tavi away from the Wargs' territory. All this time in the darkness, in the quiet, made me want to give up and cry. I hadn't seen Tavi since Troy's men took her away, so for all I knew, my best friend was dead. My mental health had been all over the place this past week, but today it was at its lowest.

If Tavi was gone, there was little point in me sticking around. At this rate, I would never see the Wargs or Tavi or Night ever again. I closed my eyes, almost wishing I could be dead, too, or at least somewhere far, far away from here.

These dark thoughts persisted even as I heard the door at the top of the staircase creak open. It was probably another one of the Kings who'd come to torture me or take me away or drug me yet again. But it was a light pair of footsteps descending the stairs, sounding nothing like Troy or any of his men.

NIGHT

The last time I'd made the trek into the Kings' lands, I'd had murder on my mind and little else. This time, as my wolves and I ran through the forest, murder was again my intent, but there were other things on my mind, too.

Bryn and Tavi were foremost in my thoughts. Not for the first time, I recalled the last moments I'd been with Bryn. I remembered every second of our conversation: the way her blouse had lifted in the breeze as I walked her to Mom's cabin, the way her lips had lifted into a slight smirk when she'd assured me that I wouldn't even miss her while she was gone, and of course, I recalled the sweetness of our last kiss.

Our last conversation had been a goodbye. She'd said that she wanted to spend time with Tavi and Mom, but it was clear to me that there was something specific she wanted to talk with them about. And whatever it was, it had put uncertainty in her large, blue-gray eyes.

Now as we zipped between trees and over boulders and through brush, I wondered what she had wanted to talk with them about. Knowing Bryn, there were a myriad of things that could have been weighing down her thoughts. We had been navigating the fact that we were mates, she was still learning how to get in touch with her wolf, and she'd just learned that she was a descendant of the pack mothers.

But it was also possible that what she wanted to talk about had nothing to do with those things. Maybe she'd wanted to talk to them about *us*. Though it wasn't the first time I'd thought about our last conversation, I'd never considered that our relationship might be what Bryn had needed to talk about.

The reason she wanted space might have been more than just missing my mom and Tavi. If there was uncertainty in her gaze, maybe she doubted something about our relationship. It made my heart sick to think that I might be the cause of her insecurity.

I hadn't thought to ask Mom about it, with her focused on her recovery and me focused on Bryn and Tavi. Now I might never know what it was that had made my mate so uncertain.

I would never forgive myself if it was my fault. I'd let my doubts take precedence over my wolf and my instincts. If I'd listened to what I really wanted, Troy's plan would have fallen apart before it started. Bryn would have been claimed, and we both would have entered this situation much stronger than Troy expected us to be.

And if I'd pushed harder to keep Bryn with me, would we have been able to avoid all of this? Bryn wouldn't have been alone, and Redwolf, seeing that Bryn wasn't at my mother's cabin, might not have attacked. Or would that have just delayed the inevitable? At one point or another, Bryn would have been left alone. As much as I wanted to keep her at my side, I couldn't have eyes on her all the time. Troy could have taken her at any moment she was by herself. At least right now she had Tavi with her.

My wolf huffed at me, and I knew what he was trying to tell me. It was useless to dwell on what I could have done differently, or what I could have done to prevent this. None of us were psychics, after all; there was no way we could have predicted when or how Troy would strike. But I figured it was normal for a man heading toward his death to revisit his regrets.

I had assured my inner circle, Dom, and Mom that I had no intention of dying, that all of my overplanning was just preparation for the worst-case scenario. At the time that I'd made those promises, I'd believed that there was a slim chance that I would survive the fight with Troy. Today, I didn't feel the same. Running was meant to clear my head and make me feel alive, but it was difficult to keep up with my wolves. Even Dr. Stan, who was the least athletic of us, seemed to be having an easier time with these hours-long running sessions. Evan was with us, too, heading the pack down a less-traveled path to the Kings' compound.

It worried me, and my wolf, but my worries didn't weigh me down. I accepted that my survival was unlikely. I was about to enter a test of endurance with a full-fledged Alpha who had the benefit of both fighting on his own turf and getting plenty of rest beforehand. Troy was a sniveling

coward, but that didn't mean he wasn't strong and well-trained.

I'd give him hell, I knew that much, but beyond that, I kept my hopes low. The last time I saw Bryn in person, she'd worn a soft smile on her face as we said goodbye. "*I'll see you soon, Night,*" her sweet voice had promised.

I held onto that image of her as we neared the Kings' compound. I could find some sense of peace and purpose in the fact that I was dying for my family. If nothing else, I hoped that I would die before Bryn, so that some strength would return to her in time for her rescue. Dom would save her, I knew; it was just a matter of whether or not I'd last long enough to *know* that he'd done it.

BECAUSE I WAS STRUGGLING, Dom recommended we take a rest a few miles out from the Kings' compound. Pride wanted me to protest, but my body was grateful for the opportunity to recover. There was a small pond near the place where we stopped. A drink sounded wonderful, but I had to wait until my heart wasn't beating at a thunderously hard pace. Once it'd quieted, I moved to the pond and took a drink from it. The water was cool and felt good sliding down my throat, and I dunked my head under the surface, letting it seep into my fur before pulling out and shaking myself off. The water gave me a burst of serotonin that I hadn't expected.

Beside me, Evan barked a laugh. "*I wasn't expecting a bath this late at night,*" he said. "*But I guess there's no arguing with my Alpha.*"

I laughed, too. "*Alphas do know best.*"

"*I thought that phrase applied for mothers.*"

I was glad that Evan was with us on the trip in; I felt more secure with my best friends near me. A healthier me might have felt excited enough to try and push him into the pond, but the thought that I might hurt myself and not have enough time to heal kept me from following through on that particular impulse.

"*You and Dom are going to split off from us in a couple more miles, right?*" I asked him.

Evan had finally had a breakthrough in his investigation, and he'd found a potential location for where Troy was keeping Bryn and Tavi. He would lead Dom and the others into that area while Jasper and I entered the compound for the challenge.

“That’s right,” he said. “I’ll reach out to you when it’s time for us to break away.”

I nodded. *“Sounds good.”*

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Dom approach the pond, take a few deep gulps of water, and wander off on his own to sit in the shade beneath a nearby tree.

Evan noticed it, too. *“Looks like he’s giving you a really hard time about this.”*

“I wouldn’t say that,” I said. “He hates my plan, but he’s going to follow through on it. Dom’s too good of a beta not to.”

“I know he will, but it can’t be good for the rest of the team to see their future Alpha sulk like this. Maybe you ought to talk to him?”

It wasn’t a bad idea. I doubted morale would be affected by Dom’s behavior, but I knew it would be good to get his temperature before we all split up (potentially for the last time).

“I’ll do that,” I said, and walked over to Dom. “Hey,” I said. “I want to check in with you before we move in closer.”

“I’m fine.”

“That’s a lie.”

“Yeah, but whether or not I’m lying isn’t going to change your mind about the plan, and it isn’t going to give either of us an alternative to it either. I’m gonna have to be away from my Alpha while he fights for his life.”

I wished I knew the right words to say that would make this easier on him. I’d forced him to accept my plan because there had been no other options, but that didn’t make it any fairer to him. I wasn’t built for comforting other people—I was built for violence and for duty. I felt powerless next to my beta was obviously in pain and struggling.

“If I were Bryn,” I said slowly, “I think I’d invite you over for chamomile and lavender tea and ask you to vent your frustrations to me.”

He looked at me, and his expression seemed to soften. *“You’re probably right...What about Tavi?”*

“You have to ask? Tavi would talk to you until you forgot about what was bothering you.”

He laughed, and I was glad that I’d brightened his mood for even a moment.

“She’d probably invite you to the next bonfire or try to sneak out with you for karaoke night in Colville.”

His laughter ended abruptly. *“You knew about that?”*

“Of course I did.” It had happened when we were younger, about a year after she’d lost her parents. *“You thought you were slick, but I saw you two sneak into the forest when I went out on my run. I saw you come back, too, and you both smelled like the air freshener they use.”*

His laughter was much more spirited then, and he fell onto his side in front of me. *“Nothing gets past you, Night,”* he said when he’d recovered. *“But that’s why you’re a great Alpha.”*

I sighed. *“The Wargs will have better Alphas than me. We’re too resilient a pack not to.”* I stood and returned to the group. *“You’ll see to that.”*

WE STOPPED ONCE MORE, once we were within a few miles of the Kings’ compound. The others would soon split away from us, but Doc insisted on the break. He was on the smaller side for a wolf, and the ends of his wheat-blond fur were silver-tipped, a paler color than even Dom’s.

“Alpha Night,” his voice slipped into my mind politely, unobtrusively, just as the doctor would enter a conversation with me.

“Did you need something, Doc?” I asked.

“I wanted to give you an examination. Just to make sure you’re in top shape.”

“Ah. That makes sense.”

Doc, other than Dom, Evan, and Mom, was the only one who understood the full toll that the unclaimed bond was having on my body. I was glad that we had him with us on this mission. Not just so that he could examine me, but also so that he could treat Bryn and Tavi for their wounds. The way they’d looked in the live video that Troy had shown me still haunted me.

Doc and I pulled away from the rest of the pack so I could have some privacy for the exam. He shifted into his human form and pulled out the long robe from the satchel he’d brought with him. Also within the bag were a few medical instruments like a thermometer, a blood pressure gauge, bandages, antiseptic, gauze, and who knew what else. He poked and prodded me for any areas that hurt. Just about all of me hurt, but I felt the pain the hardest in my abdomen and head.

“I could prescribe painkillers,” he said, having caught my eye twitching when he prodded at a particularly tender spot. *“That at least would keep you going. But it is technically against the rules for a wolf to take supplements*

before a fight.”

My tail swished with a sudden burst of annoyance. *“It’s also against the rules to force a wolf to participate in a challenge ceremony.”* Mom had drilled those rules into my head since I was a pup. I was to hold them as tenets so I would be an honorable Alpha. But given the circumstances, I decided I didn’t give a shit about the rules.

Doc nodded. “Fair enough.”

“You have my complete approval on the painkillers, Doc,” I said. *“I’d rather feel nothing.”*

He chuckled at me. “Well, they won’t be quite *that* strong, but as I said, they’ll keep the pain from debilitating you.”

“Well, if that’s what you’ve got, it’s what I’ll take.”

He shook a couple of pills onto a nearby flat stone, and used another stone to grind them up. I licked the powder up, and by the time I was finished, my tongue felt tinglingly numb. I really wanted a drink of water after that, but thinking about Alpha rules and my mom reminded me about her Alpha wound and the way Doc had treated her during her recovery.

I hadn’t thought about it very much since then because my mind had been set on getting to Bryn and Tavi, but now that I had Dr. Stan in front of me, I figured I might as well ask him about it now. I’d probably not have another chance.

“Doc,” I said, *“are you and my mother close?”*

He fumbled with the pills, almost dropping the bottle on the ground. “Wh-what makes you ask that, Alpha?”

I eyed him. *“I noticed that you seemed particularly attentive when you were treating her Alpha wound. And when she woke up, she looked at you like…”* I wasn’t sure how to complete the sentence. *“Well, I’ve never seen her look at anyone quite like that.”*

He hesitated, his hand still gripping the pill bottle.

“Don’t even consider lying to me, Doc,” I said. *“I’ll know.”*

He closed his eyes, let out a deep breath, and then he nodded. “Alright, I suppose it’s only fair that you know.”

I wasn’t an idiot; I was pretty sure I knew more or less what he was about to say. *“You and Mom have a history, don’t you?”*

“Yes, that’s one way to put it. I grew up with both Violet and Gregor. I was close with your father before he abandoned the pack.” He rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Actually, shortly after he left, he sent for me to join him

with the Kings.”

My lips pulled away from my teeth. “*He did what?*”

He nodded. “I more or less had the same disgusted reaction. I told him there was no way in hell I’d abandon my life, my friends, and my family just to have access to a river. From that moment, he was dead to me, but Violet had hope that he would send for you. She wouldn’t have sent you to him, mind you. She loathed him about as much as she loved him, but she expected him to try and take some responsibility for you. Years passed without a word from him, and then we learned that he had another son. Well, that confirmed that Gregor was too far gone. I doubt you remember that time very much, but your mother was inconsolable when she heard about Troy.”

I caught a flicker of a deep, deep memory that I’d completely forgotten about. It had the gleaming undeniability that all core memories had, but I’d buried it so deep that I didn’t know it existed until someone reminded me of it.

“I remember a period when she cried every time she looked at me. It felt like it lasted for a really long time.”

He nodded. “Yes, I’m sorry the memory stayed with you. But that was how it was.”

“She confided in you?”

“Not really. Not at first. Your mother and I had always been friends, but I was closer with Gregor. She and Gregor were the real inseparable ones because they’d acknowledged their mating bond even before they turned twenty. After he left and Peter took over, our relationship became more distant. I escaped into my studies rather than face reality, but your mother wasn’t like that. She challenged Peter constantly, and secretly disobeyed his orders. She became a pillar of strength for the pack.

“I, like everyone else, just assumed that she had gotten over Gregor. But I should have known better because even *I* hadn’t recovered from the loss of my best friend. I went on, completely ignorant of the truth until I happened to pass by her cabin late one night. I heard her letting out these deep, deep sobs, and I finally understood how much she had been suffering. I forgot that we weren’t close anymore, and knocked on the door. She tried to hide it even after I told her that I’d overheard, but when you started to cry in your crib, she broke down again. That night rekindled our friendship. We’ve only grown closer over the years.”

“You keep mentioning your friendship and your closeness,” I said. “*But*

there's more now, isn't there?"

"Ah, that's where I have to admit that I'm not sure myself." I'd never seen a man his age blush until now. "I would like for there to be something... else, something more. But you know how seriously she takes mating bonds. I don't want to ask her to compromise her morals for me. And to be honest, I'm not entirely sure that she feels that strongly about me."

I would have rolled my eyes if I didn't think it would be disrespectful. He must have forgotten that I'd seen the way she was looking at him when she woke up. Honestly, it was a little funny to see older wolves struggle with the same issues of the heart that younger wolves did.

"I think you should try and talk to her about this. And when you do, you can let her know that I gave you direct permission as your Alpha."

"You aren't upset about my feelings for your mother, Night?"

"No." I was a bit surprised by that myself, but it was true. *"I'm surprised to hear all of this, but upset? No. I think you're a good man, and after watching you treat her wounds, I know that you would treat her the way she deserves. You were there for her when my father abandoned her, and I know you'll be there for her when—if I don't walk away from this fight. It's important to me that my mother is around people who love and care about her. It's obvious to me that you've got both in spades. I couldn't imagine a better man than you, Doc."*

He stared at me for a long time, and I thought I might have seen a shimmering twinkle in his eye. For one awkward second, I tried to prepare myself for the reality that he might be about to come to tears, but he laughed instead and patted my shoulder.

"You're an incredible man and an incredible Alpha, Night," he said. "Take it from someone who's been around to witness the three who ruled before you."

"Thank you. Take care of my mother, Tavi, and Bryn, alright?"

"I promise I won't let you down. You have my word as a wolf, a doctor, and as a man."

That was all I could ask for.

NIGHT

After the examination, we resumed our run, and I felt a bit lighter on my feet than before. Dom, Evan, Doc, and the rest split from us while Jasper and I continued along the main path into Kings' territory. We shifted and pulled on clothes before entering through the gate into the compound.

The Kings were already lined up to greet us with taunts and hisses. As tough of a time as they'd had with Troy as their leader, it was clear that they still hated us Wargs more.

"*Stay close,*" I thought to Jasper as we headed toward the arena with Kings wolves literally at our heels. "*And don't let them see you flinch.*"

He nodded and pulled in a little closer to me. He was a good soldier, following my orders exactly as I gave them. Good, that was what I needed right now. While I was fighting Troy, Jasper would be the only way I would know whether Dom had gotten to Bryn and Tavi. Essentially, Jasper was my lifeline, my only connection to what was going on outside of the ring.

"*When you hear Dom's whistle,*" I said, "*I want you to reach out to me with your mind.*"

He glanced at me. "*I could whistle, too—*"

"*No. I don't want to risk tipping the Kings off to what we're doing.*"

"*Got it. I won't let you down, Alpha.*"

So many of members of my pack had been telling me that today, and even though I didn't expect to survive the fight, my heart was full. This was something that Troy and other Alphas who ruled with fear could never understand. I had complete faith in my team, and I knew that no matter what,

they would do their best. These were wolves I would have loved to run into battle with another day, fighters I felt proud to have on my side, people I trusted.

The Kings pack battle arena was a larger circle than the arena in our compound. The ground was patted smooth, and surrounded with flat rocks of similar, medium size. I was shirtless, as was the custom, and across from me stood a shirtless Troy. He bounced from foot to foot like a hyped-up boxer. His hair was in a loose ponytail, and it swished from side to side with his movements like a metronome. He sneered at me as he bounced around, a poor attempt at posturing that did little more than annoy me.

I purposefully turned my back to him and addressed Jasper, who looked even more disgusted about all of this than I was.

“You’re a good kid, Jasper,” I told him out loud.

His eyes widened. “Sir?”

I smiled. I couldn’t blame him for being surprised. “I’m sorry I was hard on you.”

“No, it was my fault for not seeing what was going on. I’m actually super embarrassed about—”

I shook my head, and he stopped talking. “None of that matters now. For what it’s worth, I don’t hold it against you.”

He looked at me for a moment, and then nodded. “Hang in there, Alpha.”

I nodded, but as I turned from him and looked at the ring, I thought, *I’ll try*. I would go out making sure that Bryn, Tavi, and my pack were safe from Troy. That was the very least I could do as the Wargs’ Alpha and as Bryn’s mate.

That said, I wouldn’t roll over and let Troy do what he wanted. I owed it to my pack and myself to give it my all once my girls were safe.

Around me, the entire Kings pack had gathered, just as Troy had wanted. They sent me looks that alternated between curious glances and outright glares. Most of them heckled me, but they wouldn’t physically attack me because it was against the rules. But just in case someone forgot, I had wolves stationed near the arena and around the territory.

When midnight arrived, it was time for us to begin. Both Troy and I stepped into the ring. The Elders were close to oversee the fight and ensure that nothing illegal happened. They’d be watching for double-teaming, forfeiting without making the promise to later die or be banished, and outside weapons. This needed to be as fair as possible, though I wanted to scoff at the

idea. If anything about this situation was fair, Troy wouldn't have taken my mate from me.

We approached each other, fists raised. We would stay in our human forms for now, but as tradition dictated, the killing blow would be dealt in our wolf forms.

Troy, unsurprisingly, threw the first punches. I dodged and weaved between that first volley of jabs—but I didn't have time to dodge his surprise left hook.

I blocked the blow with my forearm and felt the strength of the hit vibrate painfully through my bones. I grunted, and Troy grinned, increasing the speed of his punches; he threw a couple of legitimate swings into the mix at unpredictable intervals. I did my best to fend him off and keep my distance without making it look like I was trying to run away.

It was difficult to admit, but he'd truly come into his Alpha power—he was a better, stronger, and faster fighter than he'd been on the night I saved Bryn. All of this annoyed me more than worried me, which was good. Being annoyed would keep me on my toes; being worried would make me slip up.

Troy's unpredictable onslaught of blows was disorienting, but not impossible to deal with. I was losing power by the second, but that didn't mean I was going to let Troy have an easy win. Amidst the cheering of the Kings around us, Troy threw another hard punch. I ducked under it, moving in close to Troy, then I dropped and swept his legs out from under him in one swift, hard movement.

Troy hit the ground with a grunt, and a surprised gasp rippled through the crowd. I wanted to kill Troy now. Every cord of muscle would happily cooperate with me to grab Troy and snap his neck. But I couldn't yet. Instead, I took advantage of the moment of quiet to start speaking.

"You're gonna have to do better than that, little brother," I said, loud enough that the wolves in the back could hear me over the roar of the crowd. "You and I both know that this land is rightfully mine since I am Gregor's firstborn."

Another sharper round of shocked gasps spread through the crowd. Onlookers turned to each other to ask if it was true—if Gregor, before becoming their Alpha, could have sired a child. I glanced at Jasper, who shook his head. There was still no word from Dom.

Dammit, Dom! Hurry the hell up!

Troy shoved himself to his feet, roaring at the top of his lungs. "My father

abandoned you and your whore of a mother. He disowned you two decades ago! You meant nothing to him!”

I smirked, relishing the rage that reddened Troy’s face. “If that’s true, then why are you so angry now, little pup?”

He roared again, launching at me. Each blow came even faster, even harder than before. No more teasing jabs—Troy was serious.

“When you’re lying dead at my feet, I’ll claim Bryn as my own,” he declared. At the mention of her name, more confused glances were shared through the crowd, but if Troy noticed, he didn’t care. “I’ll spend our first night telling her all about how I *beat* you.” He landed a punch to my side.

I staggered back, the blow reverberating through me, but I recovered before he could land another.

“Bryn will *never* be yours,” I growled. “You’re delusional if you think you’re going to survive this fight.”

He laughed, ducking under my roundhouse. “You’re too weak to kill me.”

“*You’re* too weak to fight fairly.” I caught his wrist and yanked him toward me. As he teetered off balance, I lifted him over my head and threw him down, yards away. With that distance between us, I made another announcement to the crowd. “You had to kidnap my mate to even stand a chance against me. I wonder what Gregor would think of you if he saw how weak his supposed heir is.”

Apparently, that was the final straw for Troy. Between one second and the next, he shifted into his wolf form, kicked off his pants, and sprinted toward me. I had just enough time to shift before his teeth came for my throat. The two of us rolled around in our wolf forms, growling and snapping and snarling at each other. What remained of my pants flew from the pile of teeth and claws and the crowd continued to go wild, lost again in the violence of the fight.

I was putting up a good fight, but I knew I wouldn’t last much longer. As the fight wore on, bloody and painful, claws and teeth digging and tearing and ripping through flesh and fur, I found myself needing to tap more and more into my reserves of strength. That wasn’t good. I needed that strength to make sure I could finish off Troy when the moment finally arrived.

For now, I kicked as hard as I could, knocking Troy back toward the edge of the ring. I stood at the ready while Troy coughed and choked on air after the kick. I also tried to catch my breath. Blood poured from between my

sharpened teeth and dripped onto the ground. My body trembled as I stood there, waiting for Troy to recover.

I was buying myself some time, but it wasn't worth much. Worry flashed through me like a lightning strike. What if my quickly failing strength was because something was wrong with Bryn?

I shoved the thought away. I couldn't feel that fear right now. I needed to focus on the fight, because my mate, my pack, my sister—everything I cared about depended on how well I did in this fight.

BRYN

I braced myself for another session of Troy's tantrums, but the person I saw walking down the steps was...Dom! My heartbeat quickened as he reached the landing. If Dom was here, that meant Night couldn't be far away.

He cursed, seeing the state I was in, and crossed the room in just a few quick steps. "Hold still," he whispered, undoing the straps that kept the muzzle on my face. He removed it in just a few seconds, throwing it across the room like it was a venomous snake.

"Dom, it's so good to see you," I said, tears immediately filling my eyes.

"It's good to see you, too." He gently touched my chin, and I nearly let those tears fall. It was the first time in so long that I'd been touched in a way that wasn't meant to hurt me. "Where's Tavi?"

I inclined my head to the door on my right. "They took her into the room behind that door. We've been separated for days."

Dom stared at the door like it held the path to his future, but he stayed with me. I wasn't sure what was keeping him here when he so obviously wanted to look for Tavi until it hit me. I was his Alpha's mate. He'd probably assured Night that I would be his priority. I would have laughed if I had the energy to do it.

"Go get Tavi," I said.

His eyes, glowing amber in the darkness, flashed to mine. In them, I saw uncertainty. A question. Upstairs, I heard other people walking around. Given the quiet, gentle nature of their steps, I assumed they were more Wargs. That made me even more sure that I'd be okay while he went for Tavi.

I nodded, smiling with as much warmth as I could muster. “The others will help me out of here. Just go and get your girl.”

He seemed surprised at first that I had seen through his worry, but then he shook his head with a chuckle. “Yeah, okay. I’ll get her.” Before he left, he stood to his feet and gave a sharp whistle. Four Wargs immediately came down the steps. “Frankie, I want you and two more to help Bryn out,” he said. “The rest I want with me.”

The group nodded before separating. I closed my eyes as the three crouched around me. A couple of them had brought garrotes to get through the chains. They held my limbs still as they ran the metal back and forth rapidly over the cuffs. With their shifter’s quickness, I was free—finally, gloriously free!—in just a few short minutes. They tried to help me to my feet, but I was so weak, I needed to lean against one of them for support.

“I don’t suppose any of you brought a portable shower with you, too?” I asked.

They laughed. “We brought everything but that, it seems,” one of them responded, the female wolf whom Dom had called Frankie. “But don’t worry, we’ll get you out of here safe and sound, Bryn.”

“I know you will. Thank you.”

They took me upstairs, and out the front door. The first taste of night wind after a week of dampness and stagnant air was so sweet that I, again, almost cried. I was finally free, and I felt so much safer, even though I was still on Kings pack lands. Against the side of the cabin was a pile of Kings wolves lying still. I avoided looking at them too long, unsure how I felt about their deaths.

I glanced behind me to get a better look at the cabin, and realized that I’d seen it before, though I’d never been inside it. It was on the outskirts of the Kings’ territory and had once been the cabin that the Elders lived in. Now, its white paint had faded and weathered with age, and the building lacked upkeep.

The wolves helped me to a rock, at which point a man with ash-blond hair that grayed at the temples, a kind smile, and a lithe, muscular frame approached me. “I’m Dr. Damon Stan,” he said, crouching in front of me. “I don’t think we’ve ever formally met.”

“No, not formally.” I tried to smile at him. “It’s a relief to see you, doctor.”

“Call me Dr. Stan, or Doc. Now, I imagine you’d much rather me treat

you than exchange pleasantries. Where is your pain at its worst?"

"My neck."

He reached in the satchel he brought with him and pulled on a pair of gloves. He then gently positioned my head to the side so he could see it. He clicked his tongue, and then reached into his satchel again.

"That's an Alpha wound," he said. "It'll take a long time to heal, but it'll heal a hell of a lot faster when Night claims you."

I blushed. "Y-you know that he hasn't?"

He nodded, not at all perturbed that we were talking about such intimate matters. He was entirely focused on my wound as he dressed me with bandages and cleaning wipes. "He told me himself."

"Did he say why he waited so long?"

He chuckled. "I think that's a conversation you'll want to have with him yourself."

I perked up. "So, he's somewhere nearby then? Where is he?"

"Ah, well, he's working as a distraction so we can get you and Tavi out."

That response was frustratingly vague, but it was enough that I could start putting together the missing pieces myself. "Wait, are you saying that he's fighting Troy right now?" My relief at being rescued paled in comparison to the dread and worry I felt for Night. "No! Troy wants to fight him while he's weak, so he'll have a better chance at killing him. We need to get Night away from him right now."

The doctor finished wrapping my neck and began to bandage the worst of the scratches on my arms and legs. The glance he gave me was sympathetic. "I know you want to go to him, and I know you're worried, but he gave us strict orders to get you and Tavi safely back to our territory."

"No, you're not listening," I said. "Doc, Night might be too weak to win against Troy. If we don't do something, he could die."

"I understand, Bryn. I don't want you to think I'm minimizing your worry, because you have every right to be feeling this way. Especially after the hell you've been through." He made quick work dressing the relatively minor wounds, and finally met my gaze. "We have to trust in Alpha Night and do as he says. He knows what he's doing."

I shook my head and cast a desperate eye around me for any Wargs who might have overheard. Unfortunately, the wolves I saw were all focused on their tasks. They were carrying out Night's orders perfectly. Their obedience was admirable in many ways, and it was evidence of how well Night had

trained them, but it also meant that none of them would help me save his life.

Frustration burned in my gut almost as much as the Alpha wound burned on my neck. The Wargs wouldn't listen to me. I knew that Night was much, much stronger than me, that he had more experience and power that I wasn't aware of. But if I did nothing, I knew he would die fighting Troy in his weakened state.

I have to get to Night myself to make sure he isn't killed. No one else can go against his orders.

Dr. Stan looked at something behind me, and quickly stood. I followed his gaze, and gasped. Dom had emerged from the cabin with Tavi in his arms. It was the first time I'd seen her since we'd been separated, and Tavi had obviously suffered a lot since then. There was more blood on her clothes, and her arm dangled limply, likely broken. Where the collar had been around her neck, the skin had become almost black with bruises.

"Oh, Tavi." I couldn't have stopped the stinging tears even if I wanted to.

Dr. Stan reached out to touch Tavi, but a sharp growl from Dom made him back up a couple steps. The beta's eyes blazed with danger and fury even as he cradled Tavi in his arms. There was a pause as the wolves nearby glanced between Dom and the doctor.

"Sorry, Doc," he said, relaxing. "Let me give the signal." He gave a whistle, loud and aimed up at the sky. It spread through the forest, sending nearby birds into flight. After a couple of seconds, it ended abruptly.

"Doc," he said, "is Bryn good to move? I think Octavia needs a real hospital bed."

"She's injured, of course," the doctor replied carefully, "but as long as we've got wolves assisting her, we can start heading out. The sooner, the better."

"Good." Dom whistled again, and the dozen or so wolves that he'd brought with him began to form up.

When everyone was accounted for, we started to leave. I was leaning against another wolf for support as we moved. My worry for Night still gnawed at me, and I turned to Dom for more details on Night's whereabouts.

"Is Night challenging Troy right now?"

It took Dom a few seconds to respond. He still carried Tavi in his arms, and he was staring resolutely forward rather than down at her. I thought it might be because seeing her so broken would send him into a rage.

"It doesn't matter," he said. "We need to get back to our pack where you

and Tavi will be safe.”

My eyes narrowed slightly. “But who will keep Night safe?”

He didn’t have an answer, but the slight tightening of his jaw told me that this decision was eating at him, too. I closed my eyes as burning frustration mounted inside me. I knew it was unfair for me to be so upset with Dom or with any of the Wargs. They were only carrying out Night’s orders. But I loved Night more than anyone, more than my own life, and the thought of losing him was too much to bear.

As if Dom knew what I was thinking, he sent a sharp look my way. It wasn’t quite a glare, but it was almost stern enough to be one.

“Night wants you and Tavi home, Bryn. Not on the front lines. Both you and Tavi are so injured, you can barely walk. Going into the Kings’ den would be suicide in your current state.” He looked forward again. “I made a promise to Night, Bryn, and as much as it fucking hurts to be in this position, I plan on keeping it.”

That was that. It would be a waste of breath for me to try to convince Dom to go against Night. I’d sooner convince a tree to lie down or a brick wall to move.

So, I’d go along with them for now. I’d let them think that I was going with the plan instead of thinking of ways I might be able to slip away.

A few minutes later, the Wargs were still walking. I was grateful for the wolf holding me upright because I was able to look behind me and see that Tavi had finally opened her eyes. Unfortunately, she had yet to say a word or even make a sound. She didn’t complain about being held, didn’t moan about the aches and pains of her body—she just remained quiet in Dom’s arms with her head leaning on his shoulder. She stared at the trees without seeing them.

She was alive, but this listless version of her scared me.

Soon, the group stopped so I could rest. I sat on a fallen tree and breathed deeply. I watched Dom sit on a rock with Tavi still in his arms. Now that she was awake, he seemed more willing to let the doctor check her out. I could see Dom’s mouth moving, but I couldn’t hear what he was saying. I tore my eyes away so I could watch the wolves around me. They were fanning out, making sure that the area remained safe for our break.

I’d tried to come up with a plan of escape as we walked, but I had very little to go on. In lieu of any real steps that would take me to Night, I had a burning desire to just start running and hope that I reached him in time. I had no idea what I would do when I found Night, but I had a feeling I would

know once I saw him. I just needed to get there.

I chalked this confidence up to desperation, but I was grateful for it. It was better than worrying and crying. I was going to try to help Night in whatever way I could, even if that meant we died together.

Dying with him sounds so much better than living a life without him. My wolf snuffed in agreement.

So, when I felt sure that the others were too busy either scouting the area or checking on Tavi to pay me any attention, I got to my feet. I wobbled unsteadily at first, but then strength I hadn't known I had coursed through me. I took off at a staggering, unsteady run into the trees. After a couple of yards, my wolf pushed at me to shift, and I allowed it. My wolf body was much more coordinated, much faster, and was able to pick out Night's scent on the wind.

I knew that Dom and the rest of the wolves would be pissed at me, but I didn't care. All that mattered was getting to my mate, and I wasn't going to let negligible things like pain or guilt get in my way.

BRYN

I could hear the roar of the crowd, hundreds of Kings gathered together to watch my love die. How many times had this exact sound chased me through my nightmares? After growing up listening to the sound of the crowd from my bedroom during all the parties Troy hosted, the sound of the entire pack jeering at me and calling for my death had long haunted me at my worst moments. I pushed myself to run faster.

I made it to the compound, skidding across leaves and dirt as I came to a stop. I was too short to see through the legs of the gathered crowd, so I pushed through, avoiding stomping feet and spilled beer as I moved. As I reached the outer edge of the circle, my eyes widened.

Night was on the ground, bloodied and panting, with Troy on top of him. Troy's fangs were out, gleaming white in the moonlight. He was seconds away from bringing them down to pierce Night's throat. I couldn't let that happen.

My wolf snarled, and before I could think or hesitate, I'd crossed into the circle. I bounded for Troy, slamming my body into his to knock him off of Night. Troy hopped to his feet, and I saw surprise in the depths of his dark eyes.

The cheering turned into gasps of shock and murmured questions as I stood in front of Night. From the corner of my eye, I spotted Jasper standing to the side. He was just as shocked as the others. Behind me, Night tried to get to his feet. He whined softly, just loud enough for me to hear, and concern was clear in his tone. I didn't respond, and I didn't look back at him. If I did, I knew I'd lose my resolve.

Because I was in my wolf form, only Night would know that it was me. All the onlookers would just assume I was some random wolf or one of the Wargs, which was how I wanted it to stay. For now.

I wasn't supposed to be here in the middle of the arena while the fight went on, and I wasn't supposed to intervene in the challenge, but there was no way I could stand by and watch my mate being killed. I had no choice but to act. Damn the consequences.

Troy stood up, shifting as he moved. I wished I could look away from his naked form, but I had to keep my eyes on him. He laughed as he saw me. I was sure he recognized me because of the wound in my neck. It was still bleeding, soaking into the cold, dark ground at my feet. It was a struggle to draw each breath—even my lungs felt sore and tense with effort after the way I'd run into the fray. But I couldn't afford to think about the extent of the damage that Troy had done to me.

"How sweet," he cackled. "You couldn't wait to die along with your mate."

At the word "mate," the gossip from the crowd increased.

I growled and snapped at him. I approached him slowly, and he backed off a couple steps. It was obvious that he wasn't afraid of me, he was just making a show of it, but that didn't matter. I wanted to put more distance between him and Night.

"What? Are you challenging me?" He smirked at me, and my hatred for him deepened. "You're even more stupid than I thought if you think you can do that here."

Behind Troy, an Elder cleared his throat. The crowd looked to him as he approached the circle. "Actually, Alpha Redwolf," he began gently, "as per shifter rules, you must accept any challenge that a wolf presents to you."

Troy scoffed. "She's not worth the effort."

"I'm sorry, Alpha, but if you don't accept her challenge, you must relinquish your Alpha title."

Those words caused Troy to growl. He snatched the Elder by the front of his shirt and lifted him from the ground. "*No one* will take my title away from me."

The Elder's face paled. "O-of course, Alpha."

Troy dropped the man and shoved him back into the crowd. "Fine. I'll accept your challenge. Saves me the trouble of having to kill you later." The smirk was back on his face. "At least now your mate and your mother will

get to watch me tear you apart.”

I hadn't seen my mother in the crowd. I cast my eyes over the surrounding people and spotted her standing off to the side. She gave me a confused frown. She wouldn't realize that it was me. Not yet.

“Don't!” That was Night's voice. I turned to face him automatically. He was hurt, of course, his skin dark with bruises and stained with blood, but he was still my Night. His eyes were a deep forest green, and I saw the pain and fear within them. When he spoke again, his voice was quieter, but I heard him as clearly as though he were standing next to me. “Please, go home. I've only just got you back.”

His words made my heart ache, but I knew I couldn't back down. I knew my chances of winning were slim to none. I knew that I was weak because of the Alpha wound and because of the time I'd spent away from Night, but I had to try. If I didn't, Night and Troy's fight would resume, and Night would die. Knowing my mate, I was sure he would do everything in his power to take Troy out with him, but I couldn't risk it.

I tore my eyes away from Night. I had to do what I could as his mate, but also as a member of the Wargs pack to protect the Alpha. *My Alpha.*

From the corner of my eye, I spotted Jasper and Dom pushing their way forward. Night's reaction must have tipped them off to my identity, and they looked almost as scared for me as Night did. It hurt to see how much they cared for me—especially Dom. He should have been with Tavi, but he'd followed me to the arena instead. I hated that I was putting them in the position of having to watch as I fought Troy, but there was nothing I could do about it at this point. My challenge was made, and Troy had accepted it. I didn't have any choice but to fight.

“Come with us!” Dom shouted. “We have to get you and Tavi home. Night will be okay—he'll finish this for all of us!”

I shook my head. My wolf and I had both made up our minds. I knew that Dom was trying to do what Night had told him to do. He wanted to make sure that Tavi and I were safe, and as long as I was out here, in Troy's line of sight, he had failed to uphold his end of that plan. It made me feel even worse about putting him in this position, but I had a mate and a pack to protect.

I hoped Night wouldn't hold this against Dom if I didn't survive.

“Please, Bryn!” Dom said.

I shook my head at him, and as my gaze met his, I saw his eyes go wide. I didn't understand why at first, but then all two hundred pounds of Troy

—*When did he have time to shift?*—barreled into me.

I yelped as I flew to the other end of the arena, slamming hard onto the packed ground.

“Bryn!” That was Night’s voice again, but I couldn’t look at him. I’d let myself get distracted already, and Troy had taken advantage. Now I needed to focus.

I pushed myself to my feet, but Troy was already on the move again. He slammed into me a second time, but this time when I hit the ground, I rolled to my feet. He growled at me, crowding my space, but I snapped at him and he hopped back.

I took a few steps back myself. It was hard to focus on him now that the crowd had started to yell and jeer again. I couldn’t imagine how previous fighters had dealt with the weight of so many pairs of eyes on them. How did they manage to deal with their opponent when people were constantly gesturing at them or cursing them?

Suddenly, Troy closed in again. I tried to charge him, but he easily stepped out of my way. I yelped again when his fangs bit through my side, tearing into fur and flesh. It burned like nothing else could. I jerked away from him and maneuvered to the side. Troy spat blood and fur onto the ground, his tongue lolling red from the side of his mouth. I backed away, my legs trembling.

I tried to think of my next move. Troy was bigger than me, and he was so much stronger. Even at full health, I doubted I would be a match for him. Night had already been removed from the ring so that he couldn’t interfere. There were Kings wolves holding him, Jasper, and Dom back. My mother had moved closer to the circle, but she could only watch on in horror as realization filled her blue eyes. I returned my attention to Troy and tried to ignore the way exhaustion pumped through my body like blood. I really was doing this on my own.

Troy lunged again and tackled me to the ground. I avoided his snapping teeth, but in the process, my wounds filled with stinging dirt. I howled in pain and kicked him off of me. He recovered quickly, pouncing on me again.

I heard the crowd. I heard my mate. I heard my friends as they shouted after me. I wanted to cry as Troy put me through yet another beating, but I refused to give him or the Kings that satisfaction. I would stay strong to the end because I’d done the right thing. After years of living under the Kings’ thumb, I had finally fought for what I loved and for what mattered to me—

Night and the Wargs.

This time, Troy backed off on his own, playing with me. I rose shakily to my feet. *It's not over until I'm dead!* I thought with a growl. Troy's wolf gave a panting laugh, as though he could hear me. I was upright, but I wasn't steady. My body had grown numb, and I felt myself losing consciousness. A sweet, everlasting void was lingering just on the edge of my vision. I'd lost so much blood. In just a few more minutes, I would be too weak to remain awake, and by then, I would be as good as dead.

Troy ran at me again, and I started to close my eyes. This was it...

My wolf whimpered inside my head, and pushed at my mind. My eyes snapped open. At the last second, I rolled to the side, out of Troy's way. He yelped in surprise, skidding to an unsteady stop. That hadn't been me dodging, it was my wolf.

Dammit! I had been holding onto the reins despite my wolf trying to take charge. The moment I realized this, I receded to the background and let her surge forward for control. My need to plan and strategize wouldn't help me here. Troy was unpredictable, and he was strong. What I needed was action, not hesitation—instinct, not second-guesses. As my wolf took charge, I turned off the urge to think things through and let her step in.

Immediately, a new power moved through me, overwhelming me with its unbridled strength. My wolf rose from our crouch, flexing and stretching, before leveling her gaze on Troy's wolf. He hesitated, surprise evident in the way he tensed, his hackles raised. Obviously, he'd sensed the change in his opponent.

But his surprise didn't last long. Soon, he charged us again, but my wolf was ready. With a growl, she sidestepped him, biting into his hip. Troy yipped, but she tightened her hold. She threw him to the other side of the arena, where he scrambled to get back to his feet. Now he was the one gushing blood while my wolf enjoyed the taste of copper.

Troy had over two decades of fighting experience, and I had none, but my wolf had a counter for every move he made against me, which turned the tides of the fight. I easily dodged out of the way of his snapping fangs and swept under him, knocking him off his feet. My wolf body was graceful, sleek as a bullet, and deadly.

Troy stood on unsteady legs, staring at me like he'd never seen me before. Blood dripped from the gashes and wounds my fangs and claws had left on his body. The crowd had fallen silent, everyone's eyes were on us,

amazed at our power. My wolf and I basked in their attention.

I gave Troy a smirking laugh, and he snarled back at me, running at me with everything he had. Instead of dodging, I ran at him, too. I saw in his eyes the intent to kill. If he had the chance, he would end me now. Fortunately for me, I had no intention of giving him that chance.

In the moment we would have collided, I used my size to my advantage, ducking my nose under his body and flinging my head upward, launching Troy into the air. He yipped and yelped as he flew through the air, his limbs flailing for purchase. He hit the ground on his back, his head thudding with teeth-chattering force. He lay still.

The crowd, if possible, went even more silent. I stood over Troy, panting, my limbs trembling. The fight had taken everything out of me, but I forced myself to stay still and observant. I had no idea if Troy was dead or unconscious—I wasn't even sure which I would have preferred—but I'd do everything I could to make sure that he didn't get up again. Even if my strength betrayed me.

The three Elders entered the battlefield and two crouched down next to Troy. One of them checked for a pulse while the other opened his eyes to see if his pupils were responsive. The final Elder stood waiting for the verdict. The two at Troy's body looked up and shook their heads.

My heart thudded hard and fast in my chest. *Wait, does that mean that I'm...?* I couldn't finish the thought. As long as I didn't have to fight anymore, as long as I'd kept Night safe, I was happy.

The third Elder lifted his head to address the crowd. "Troy has fallen," he announced, his deep voice gravelly with age. "He is no longer Alpha of the Kings."

Gasps and whispers spread through the crowd. People looked at each other, confusion and shock evident in their expressions and nervous energy. I still hadn't moved. I just wanted to rest.

The third Elder turned to me and bowed. "Please," he said, "shift back to your human form so that we can see our newest Alpha."

Shit. I hadn't realized that this was part of the process, but even in my addled brain, it made sense. They wanted to honor their new Alpha... unfortunately, I had no idea how they would respond once they saw it was me, the formerly human girl who had been the pack outcast for all her life. There was no way that this was going to go over well.

I turned to the crowd and saw Dom and Jasper standing with Night.

Night had put on a pair of pants and held a shirt draped over his arm. He nodded at me. Okay, I guess I really did need to shift. But everything would be okay as long as he was here.

I took a deep breath and let the shift flow over my body. I stood before the Kings, naked, bloodied, and bruised, as their new Alpha. Recognition hit the eyes of the onlookers, people I knew and to whom I had served breakfast. People who had bullied me or ignored me.

They erupted into a mixture of shock and outrage. They shouted at me, but I only had eyes for Night, who pushed his way through the crowd toward me. He helped me into the shirt that he had draped over his arm, and it dropped to the top of my thighs. I stared up at him. It felt like it had been years since I'd last seen his handsome face. And here he was in front of me again. All the noise faded to the background as he pulled me into a tight hug.

I melted into his embrace and inhaled his dark, woody scent. I moaned gently, my wolf purring at being close to him again. This was my Night, my mate, my man, and he was the only thing I needed. Being in his arms again felt wonderful and perfect and *right*; I never wanted to leave.

All too soon, Night pulled back. The Elders struggled to quiet the onlookers as Night examined my neck. I felt more than heard his growl when he saw the bite mark there.

"I know," I told him, my hands on his chest, feeling his warmth, "but I'm okay. Troy tried to...to mark me, but it didn't work." I reached up for his face, felt the beard there. I realized he must not have shaved in the week since I'd been gone, and his beard had come in so full and dark.

"How are you, baby?" I asked.

His eyes softened to their usual emerald green. Before he could answer, I was pulled from his arms. I panicked for about half a second before I felt the warm, soft embrace of my mother's arms. *Finally!* I squeezed Mom tight and she held me back. Tears pricked at my eyes and slipped down my cheeks.

"I was so worried about you, Bryn," she said, pulling back to look at me. "But here you are, so strong and so beautiful...and you're a wolf somehow?"

"It's a crazy story," I said with a laugh. "I have so, so much to tell you, but I'll save that for later."

She nodded and pulled me in for another hug. She eyed Night over the top of my head. Night, who looked like he would have preferred to keep me to himself, acknowledged her look with a respectful nod.

"Attention!" The Elders spoke at the same time, their voices finally

silencing the Kings.

“Troy is no longer the Alpha,” one of them began. “However, according to pack laws, only a male can be Alpha. Until we can put forward a new set of challenges, Bryn will serve as the temporary Alpha until a male has been victorious.”

Annoyance tinged with apprehension pulsed through the exhaustion that thrummed through my body—annoyance about the sexist ways the packs continued to operate, and apprehension at the sudden new responsibility on my shoulders. Becoming Alpha had been the last thing on my mind when I’d jumped into the fight, but suddenly, I’d become the interim leader of the pack I’d once served.

Exhaustion kept me from feeling the full brunt of my feelings. I just wanted to get to a bed, any bed, and take a break. My body was starting to go numb, which, while concerning, was better than the constant state of pain I’d endured over the past seven days. The Alpha wound in my neck, however, continued to send ripples of stinging electricity through my blood. I tried not to think about it—the more I acknowledged it, the worse the pain got.

“Get that bitch out of here!” someone from the crowd shouted out.

“Fucking witch! She tricked us all!” another hissed.

“I’ll kill her myself before I see her as Alpha!”

Night growled loudly, his fangs sharpening, which brought most of my detractors to silence. I was surprised at how little their words meant to me; I’d expected them to be upset, and I’d expected their rage, but their insults rolled off of me completely. Whatever the reason was, I was glad that I could be strong in the face of it, that I didn’t let it bring me to my knees the way it would have if I was still the old Bryn.

“Alpha,” one of the Elders approached, “what do you plan to do with Troy?”

Troy still lay in a heap on the ground. For all of the Kings’ indignation at me being their interim Alpha, no one was taking care of him or checking up on him—not his supposed supporters, not the doctors, no one. He lay on the ground like a broken toy. I had no qualms admitting to myself that seeing him like that gave me a lot of satisfaction.

“You could have him banished, killed, or imprisoned.”

I frowned. A couple of months ago, I had wished that Troy was dead. But now that his fate was in my hands, I knew I didn’t want to kill him. Nor did I want to order someone else to do it. Banishing him would bring him a lot of

shame, shame I knew he could hardly stand to live with, but that would mean essentially letting him roam free in the surrounding wilderness. Unless he died, there was a good chance that some unsuspecting wolf would happen onto his path, and he would kill them. He would be a thorn in my side unless he was dead or, well, imprisoned. Which meant I had only one option.

“I want him locked up for the remainder of his life,” I said, my voice strong. “I never want him to be seen again.”

The Elders bowed their head to me. “Of course, Alpha.” They turned to look at one of the guards and snapped their fingers. Troy’s body was carried toward the cells.

“Everyone,” one of the Elders said, “return to your homes! The festivals for celebrating the temporary Alpha will start in four days’ time.”

A wave of dizziness overtook me, and I stepped back into Night’s arms. As the crowd began to reluctantly disperse, my world went dark. The last thing I was aware of was the comfort of my mate’s arms around me again.

NIGHT

I woke in the Kings' Alpha cabin, and immediately the stench of it made me want to gag. Troy was everywhere—in the sheets, the walls, the rugs—he was a stain that couldn't be removed. The last time I'd been in this fucked-up cabin, I'd wanted to burn it down. Now, the urge to grab a lighter was even stronger. I hated that I was lying in the same bed where Troy had sex with other women. But I needed the rest—my body was sore, and I was growing weaker the longer I went without claiming Bryn.

I would have to wait a bit longer, though, because we were both injured. Especially Bryn. My body ached something fierce, but I turned on my side to see her. She was still fast asleep.

Her chestnut hair fanned around her head, blazing with hues of copper and gold in the sunlight that streamed in through the window. She was beautiful even now, making it all the more painful to see the purple and faded brown bruises on her arms, shoulders, and legs. When she'd shifted into her human form last night after defeating Troy, I'd seen the full extent of the torture Troy had put her through. The bruises on her sides and on her back were almost black, they were so fresh. And even at that distance, I'd been able to tell that she was struggling for breath. It made my blood boil to see everything he'd done to her—especially that Alpha wound, plain as day on her neck.

I was beyond relieved that she'd been able to resist his attempt to claim her, but it destroyed me to know that he had even tried to put his mark on her. She had undoubtedly been dealing with the pain of the bite throughout the fight, and yet, she'd still won.

I reached for her face, brushing my fingers over her cheek, also bruised. A small smile lifted her pink lips, but she otherwise lay still. She would be alright once I claimed her, but it was awful to see her so hurt.

Still asleep, she moved closer to me, a slight groan slipping past her lips. I held her against me, never wanting to let her go again. When I closed my eyes, my heart began to race; the sight of Bryn and Troy in the ring together still lurked in my mind's eye. Icy fear rose from the tips of my toes and up to my shoulders as I remembered each time she had stumbled or faltered. Those Kings had needed to hold me back, because every time Troy got a hit in, I'd lunged for the circle.

I didn't think I would ever be able to recall those moments without wanting to die. Being unable to look away as my mate fought for her life, and mine, while being helpless to do anything about it. I had known she was going to die. Waiting for Troy to land that final blow had made me almost lose every shred of control I still had over myself and my wolf.

I knew that Bryn wasn't a pushover, especially not now that she had a wolf of her own, but that ring was the last place I'd wanted her to be. She was supposed to be safe and sound on Wargs territory, not in a battle arena with her tormentor and abuser literally inches away. I had known there was ancient power in her, but now I saw that her power was raw and untapped. Wild as fuck. Dangerous as hell. Bryn needed training to learn how to fight and control that power as well as her wolf, and that required patience and time.

She'd gone into the ring with so many disadvantages, but watching her finally start to figure out how to let her wolf take over, watching her get the best of Troy, had made my chest feel tight with so many emotions—pride and love chief among them.

Bryn was coming into her own more and more as time went on, and I was beyond thrilled that I had the privilege of watching it happen. But my happiness and relief were shaded by a bit of doubt. Was I still good enough to be the one by her side?

Before I could pursue that dark line of thinking, Bryn nuzzled into my chest. Her nose was a bit cold, but that didn't bother me or my purring wolf. He hadn't been this docile in days.

“Are you awake?” I asked, gently brushing her hair off her cheek.

“Mm-hmm...” She looked up at me and gave me a sleepy smile so warm and loving that it made all of the hardship, all of the suffering, worth it ten

times over.

We kissed for the first time in a week. Her lips were soft and slightly cold, sweet as they moved in sync with mine. She wrapped her arms around my neck and I smoothed my hand up her side. I kissed her again, this time with tongue, and she groaned, tightening her fingers around the back of my neck. My mate was back.

I wanted to crush her to me, to feel every inch of her body against mine. Though I knew that I could endure the aches and pains that would follow those actions, I wouldn't put her through that. Bryn was fragile. She was still hurt. The saccharine licorice stench of her Alpha wound warred with her sweet, floral scent, but it only made me want to cuddle her closer and hide her from the world.

There was still a slight wheeze to each of her breaths. It hurt my heart to hear those little gasps and the moist rattle in her lungs. My hands were pressed gently to her back, and I felt how hard it was for her under the palms of my hands. She had been through hell, and I wanted to respect her boundaries. I wanted to claim her, but even my wolf was reluctant to take it any further than this kiss and these featherlight touches, even though I yearned for more.

I pulled back and pressed my forehead to hers. She panted from our kiss, her lips slightly swollen.

"I love you, Bryn." I said it like a promise into the inches of space between us.

She gasped gently, though the gasp was more of a small sob. "Night, I love you, too." Her hands trembled as she moved them through my hair. I would have loved to focus on how good her touch felt, but she was crying harder now and I didn't know why.

"Baby, what's wrong?" I asked, moving my hand up to thumb away her tears.

More fell, coating my hand. "I'm so—so sorry," she choked. "It's my fault that your mom—that she—" Instead of finishing, she started crying in earnest.

"Bryn, my love..." I kissed her forehead. "My mother is alive."

She halted her sobbing just long enough to ask, "She-she's what?"

"It would take more than a Redwolf to kill Violet Shepherd," I told her. I'd hoped to lighten the mood, but she started crying again, though this time I knew they were tears of relief and joy rather than sadness. She was starting to

cough and wheeze, so I kissed her forehead.

“I hate that you’ve had to believe all this time that she was dead,” I said, stroking her back. “It’s not your fault, and I don’t blame you at all for what happened to her. That was between my family and Redwolf. Everything is okay, you’re safe, and I won’t let anything happen to you.”

She was crying too hard to respond, so she nodded into my hand. She lifted the sheet and wiped her eyes with it. As her tears began to stop flowing, her breathing became more regular, too. She heaved a sigh and pulled back to look at me. Her eyes were so blue and bright with wetness.

“Night, I’ve been wondering about something for a while.”

“What is it?”

Her lower lip wobbled and she almost started to cry again, but my brave girl didn’t let them fall. “Why didn’t you claim me when you had the chance?”

The question caught me off guard, so I was slow to answer. “I—”

But she was speaking again, too fast for me to interrupt. “If it’s because I need to prove that I’m worthy first, I understand, but it hurts when you tell me that you love me if it’s not true.”

Her words were like a lance through my chest. And the wound that was left behind burned with shame. I had no idea—*none*—that she was so hurt, or that she’d been carrying this burden around even through all this shit with Troy. She must have been wondering this from the first time we had sex.

“Bryn, look at me.”

At first, she refused, looking instead at my chest or at the blankets.

“Bryn, please...”

She lifted her head, and her gaze met mine.

“How can you think that you’re not worthy when you’re a descendant of the pack mothers, when you survived through a week of torture, when you bore an Alpha wound and lived, and when you defeated the fucker who’s tormented you your whole life? You are incredible and brave and strong, and if anyone isn’t worthy of you, it’s...” *Me*. That was what I almost said. But I wouldn’t take attention away from what she was saying about herself. I needed to comfort her. “Bryn, how can you think something so cruel and so wrong about yourself when you’re the most amazing woman I have ever met in my life?”

She started to push away from me, shaking her head. “Because I know I’m not. And with this ugly Alpha wound and all the bruising and...and the

shit that Troy put me through...it'd be wrong of me to think that you could ever want me..."

"Bryn." I tugged her back into my arms, and after a moment's hesitation, she let me. "Bryn, I wouldn't deserve to be your mate if I thought any less of you for these wounds, these battle scars." I brushed my hand over her cheek.

She looked away, glancing at the mirror on the wall across from the bed. She gently touched the wound with her fingertips, prodding the swollen skin with her fingertips.

"But I can hardly stand to look at myself. I can only imagine what you must think about me now. Just because we've mated doesn't mean you want me."

My heart twisted at hearing her say these things about herself. "Bryn." I silenced her with a kiss. "No," I said. "None of that. I will *always* want you. No matter what, you will always be beautiful to me."

She let me kiss her again, but she felt listless in my arms. There was still uncertainty in her eyes, and I knew that what I was saying wasn't enough. She still believed that there was a greater reason for why I hadn't claimed her, a reason that had to have something to do with her. I knew I needed to come clean about the things that had held me back. Damn my insecurities—I'd done this to her. It was my fault that she doubted me now.

"Mate," I said, pulling her closer, "it wasn't you that made me hesitate, it was myself. I was terrified that you would reject me when you found out that I was related to the Redwolfs. After everything Troy and Gregor and the Kings had done to you, I thought for sure that you would hate me for having any connection to them. I didn't know how to tell you the truth, and I didn't want to claim you before you had the option to say no." It felt like I was ripping my heart out to admit this to her, but I pushed through it. Bryn needed to hear this. "I didn't want to take away your option to refuse to be linked to them, through me, but I had no idea how much it would hurt you."

"Oh, Night," she pressed her hands to my chest, "you're *nothing* like them."

"If you knew what I was like before we met, you might not think that," I said, bitterness giving a harsher edge to my tone than I intended. "All I cared about was taking back my birthright."

"That's not true. You wanted to make the lives of your pack better."

"Sure, that was part of it, but when I thought about becoming Alpha of the Kings, the first thing that came to my mind was the glory of assuming

what was rightfully mine.” I closed my eyes, and when I opened them, I found Bryn frowning at me. Served me right, considering how selfish I’d been. “I’ve spent over ten years as Alpha trying to improve things for the Wargs, but in the back of my mind, I knew that I was chasing after the legacy my father denied me.”

“Night, no.” She shook her head, moving her hands up to my face. “You’re doing yourself such a disservice. I swear to you. You’re not like them.”

I shook my head. “I wish I could be so sure.”

“Hey.” She kissed the tip of my nose. It tickled. “I had no idea that the scary Alpha of the Wargs could feel insecure about anything.”

I chuckled despite myself. “I’m still a person, Bryn.”

“Of course, but in my eyes, you’ve always been this monolith, this tower of strength and capability. I’d never in my life met a man who cared so deeply about his people and his family even as he lifted them up almost singlehandedly.”

My face warmed. “Flattery would usually get you everywhere, but I’m supposed to be comforting you, right? The things Redwolf put you through...”

I could have kicked myself for bringing up what she’d suffered during a lighthearted moment. But other than the lowering of her eyes and the slight frown on her lips, the reminder didn’t seem to take her out of the moment.

“I think we’re supposed to be comforting each other, Night,” she said. “It’s so, so good to see you again after all this time. It feels like it’s been years since I was with you like this, not days.”

“I know what you mean. I felt like I was losing my mind, Bryn. It was so hard to fight against the thought that I might not see you or Octavia again.”

She nodded. “When I heard you were fighting Troy, and when I saw you on the ground, I wasn’t able to stop myself from jumping in. I couldn’t watch you die.”

I tried not to wince at the memory. “It wasn’t my proudest moment, but it was a tough fight. In those seconds, when I saw Troy’s teeth flashing toward my throat, I knew I was going to die. I was going to tear my claws into his stomach, rip him apart from the inside out.”

She shuddered. “I’m so glad it didn’t come to that. Troy weakened us both by keeping us apart, but I know that doesn’t make it any easier for you. Winning meant so much to you.”

“Not nearly as much as getting you back.” I kissed the top of her head. “You can imagine how hard it was for me, watching on the sidelines while you fought that asshole.”

She nodded. “I can. I never want either of us to have to go through that again.”

“Well, depending on how this Alpha thing goes, I’ll have to fight again. You understand that, don’t you?”

She smiled. “I do, but you’ll have claimed me by then, so it’ll be much easier for you.”

At the mention of claiming, my heartbeat picked up, and my lust for her became impossible to ignore. And along with that desire came a much sweeter emotion, one I hadn’t thought I was capable of feeling.

“You still want me to claim you even knowing the truth about me?” I knew it was stupid to ask this when the two of us had become so weak because I hadn’t done it. But I needed to hear her answer, and to confirm that she meant it.

In response, she pressed featherlight kisses over my forehead, down my temple, over my chin, and finally onto my lips. Then she kissed me again more firmly, lingering there. It was tender, sweet, and reminded me of everything I loved most about my mate: her kindness, her gentleness, and her determination. When she pulled away, I moaned in protest, a small sound I couldn’t have stopped even if I’d wanted to.

She giggled, and it made my heart soar. “It doesn’t matter to me where you came from, Night. The man I know is fierce and wonderful and gallant—and *mine*.” She kissed me again, and this time there was real heat behind it. “All I want to do is make it official,” she whispered against my lips.

NIGHT

Her name was a sigh on my lips as I pushed her onto her back. I hovered over her body, taking in her soft smile, her flushed cheeks, and her bright eyes the color of blue steel. “Are you sure?” I asked. “You’ll tell me if your injuries start to hurt?”

She pushed herself up onto her elbows and ran her tongue from my collarbone to my neck, where my pulse beat hardest. “I’m more than ready, Night,” she said, her breath cooling the spot she’d licked, sending shivers down my spine. “I’ve waited too long already.”

Well, I didn’t need to be told twice.

I caught her mouth again, and we fell to the bed together. Her legs spread open beneath me, and the wonderful, intoxicating scent of her wafted between us, making my wolf and I purr with desire. Careful to avoid the Alpha wound, I trailed kisses from her mouth, over her throat and down to her soft, round breasts, lapping at one of the hardened, pink peaks.

“Night,” she moaned as I pulled one into my mouth. She dragged her fingers through my hair and tugged, biting her lip as I sucked her nipple into my mouth.

As I switched to the other side, I let my hand caress down her stomach to her sweet pussy. She moaned as I stroked her slowly up and down. Already, my girl was so wet for me. I let go of her nipple so I could continue kissing down past her stomach to taste the treasure there.

I dragged my tongue up and down her salted honey flavor. She gasped my name as I slipped a finger inside, her muscles clenching around me. So much time apart had made her every bit as tight as the first time we made

love. But I wouldn't complain. With a bit of encouragement, I'd soon have her loosened up again.

Her hands found my hair again, more insistent. "Harder," she whimpered. "Please, Night."

Her sweet voice made my cock twitch. "That's my good girl," I said, easing in another finger. "How's that?" Before she answered, I resumed my meal, lapping at her lower lips before focusing on her clit. It pulsed under my tongue.

"Y-yes—!" Her fingers tightened in my hair. "Night, yes!"

I pumped my fingers in and out of her warmth, curving them upward to the spot I knew she loved. She panted my name again and again in time with my thrusting. I used my free hand to hold her steady as she trembled, pressing my face more firmly into her softness. Looking up at her, I admired the way her breasts trembled and bounced with each move she made. I loved watching her gorgeous face contort with pleasure. Her climax wasn't far off. I could sense it.

She had to have been exhausted from her fight with Troy, but she bucked beneath me as I pressed the pads of my fingers to that spot. My mate was so strong. So incredible. And all *mine*. I upped the pace until her soft thighs tightened around my head. Then, I pulled my fingers out so I could plunge my tongue inside. I lost myself in her taste, in the way her smooth skin felt against mine, in the way her screams echoed around the room. I kept her orgasm going as long as possible, pushing it on and on with just my tongue.

When her body gave out, I let her fall to the bed again. She panted beneath me, her face bright red, her arm draped across her eyes. I licked my lips and wiped my chin with the heel of my hand as I looked down at her. My beauty, my mate.

"Finished already?" I asked, pushing my pants down.

"N-no." She pulled her arm away and peered up at me with eyes that took hold of my heart and squeezed. When she saw that I was naked, those eyes began to burn with want. She drank in every inch of me, and reached out. "I want it."

"Oh, sweet thing," I crawled over her again, "I know you do."

Our kisses became more insistent, more searching. Her tongue found mine as she wrapped her arms around my neck. I reached down to tease her open with my cock. She spread her legs wider. I broke our kiss to groan as I pushed inside. Knowing what she felt like, it was the sweetest torture to go so

slow, but I didn't want to stretch her too fast.

Her fingers dug into my skin, and she lifted her head to watch me fill her up. As I eased those last few inches in, she threw her head back and gave a trembling sigh. With the next thrust, she bit her lip. I cradled her close to my chest so that every inch of her was flush with every inch of me. I felt her heart beating through her chest and into mine, an intimacy I'd never shared with any other woman. I pressed my forehead to hers and began to thrust.

"Ohhh," she purred. "Niiight—!"

Never had my name sounded better than when she moaned it out like that.

When slow stopped being enough for her, I pushed her down to the mattress and buried my face in her neck, upping the pace.

She wrapped her legs around my waist, and my teeth sharpened. It was time, and I was ready, but I had to ask her again.

"Are you sure you want this?" I asked.

She growled at me, an actual growl that surprised me with its ferocity. "Hurry up and bite me before I bite you first."

I would have laughed, but my wolf surged forward. It was all the encouragement we needed. I sped up my thrusts, and her growl softened to a moan as I hit her favorite spot. She clenched around me, her fingers tightening in my hair, and I bit her right over the spot where Redwolf had attempted to mark her.

The bitterness of the Alpha wound tried to invade my mouth, but my will was much stronger. She grunted in pain. I hated that this moment was at all tainted by what Troy had done to her. Soon, the bitterness faded away, and her blood rushed into my mouth, luscious and hot and intoxicating. She cried out again, in pleasure this time.

"*Mine*," I roared into her mind, teeth still deep in her flesh.

"Yours," she gasped.

To complete the claiming, Bryn bit deep into my shoulder, mirroring my bite. Our wolves rushed to meet each other, howling with delight, and as they met, our climaxes rushed over us, sweet and tingling with electricity and fire. I came hard inside her, and I felt her shiver from the force of it.

I felt our connection like a strong cord that wrapped around us, binding us inextricably to each other. When the waves of pleasure finally calmed, we collapsed beside each other, the sheets damp with sweat and blood. I felt deliciously satisfied, full and whole and with a sense of inner peace I'd never known before. Troy's scent was gone from the bed, just as it was meant to be.

Bryn cuddled closer, and I automatically pulled her against me. Our wounds were gone, even the wheezing rattle in her chest had disappeared. I felt like I could take on the entire Kings pack on my own and still come out on top. But at the same time, a deep, satisfied exhaustion settled over me. I turned my head to nuzzle into her hair.

I must have fallen asleep for a few minutes, because when I opened my eyes again, Bryn was lying on top of me, her breasts flush with my chest. She rested her cheek just below my collarbone and followed the pattern of my tattoo with her fingertips.

“Night,” she whispered, “I wonder if you’re happy.”

I chuckled. “Is that a real question?”

Her head lifted quickly, her cheeks flushing. “I—I thought you were asleep.”

“I think I was.” I turned onto my side and pulled her tight against me so that every inch of me was pressed against every inch of her, just the way I’d wanted to this morning.

“Oh.” There was a cute, shy pause before she said, “Well, yes, it’s a real question. I want to hear the truth from your lips.”

It struck me how similar the two of us were. The odds of either of us finding our mates in a world as hard and as cruel as this one were so slim. It almost felt too good to be true that fate, with the shit hand it had dealt us, would bring the two of us together.

“Night?” she asked again.

“I never thought I would know happiness like this,” I said. When I spoke, my voice was thick with emotion. I tried to swallow it down, but it wouldn’t budge. “You have changed my entire world, Bryn. And I know that I was an asshole to you for a long time, but I hope you can forgive me and let me show you over and over that I can be a wolf who’s worthy of you.”

Tears filled her eyes and slipped out. She was better at this than I was. She could tap into this vulnerable side of herself so quickly without letting it destroy her. And she could smile so easily, even after all that Troy had put her through. She was so incredibly strong, and my love for her swelled.

“You have nothing to prove, Night,” she told me through her tears. “I can feel you in each beat of my heart, in my soul, and I know that I am complete.” She moved my hand to her chest, and I felt her heart beating hard and fast, in sync with mine. “You’ve given me a family and a place where I belong. You are my everything, and I wouldn’t want it any other way.”

Hearing her say these things, I closed my eyes, a tear slipping down my own cheek. I didn't feel ashamed of it, not when I had my soulmate there to comfort me, kiss me, and hold me. Bryn had chosen me, she made me feel special and wanted. I could never want for anything as long as I had her by my side.

And I would be dead in the ground before I let another soul take her away from me.

BRYN

I woke up the next morning feeling better than I had since, well, ever. Not just since the day that Troy kidnapped me—better than I had felt ever in my entire life. I felt this fullness that I had never known before, a kind of peace that blanketed over me and held me close.

Before, when I closed my eyes, I had no senses beyond what I could immediately see, feel, taste, hear, and smell, but now there was somehow so much more. Every time Night breathed, his arm would brush mine, and even that small touch would send pleasure rippling over me.

Is this what it's like to have a soulmate?

My wolf answered with a purr. I knew that meant yes.

I sat up in bed, marveling at the ease with which I moved. My wounds were all healed, and it looked like all traces of Night's wounds had largely disappeared too, aside from a new scar here or there.

Carefully, so as not to wake him, I slipped out of bed and padded over to the mirror. I shifted my hair over my shoulder to cover the Alpha wound, and my hair tingled over the spot where Night bit me. I had to know if it was still there, but I wasn't ready to look right away.

I closed my eyes, took a few deep breaths, and then opened them, flipping my hair off of my neck. I almost gasped. All I saw on the right side of my neck was the shape of Night's teeth imprinted there. There was no trace of an Alpha wound or of the beatings Troy had put me through. Only Night's mark, which made me hot all over, remained.

I glanced at the reflection of the bed in the mirror, and watched the rise and fall of Night's sleeping form. As lust shot through me, so, too, did my

relief. The relief almost overshadowed my desire to wake him with a few bites to the place where I'd left my own mark on him. I couldn't be happier that the Alpha wound was gone. I had been so afraid that whenever I looked at my shoulder, I would be reminded of the awful things that Tavi and I had gone through. I sent a quick thanks up to the heavens that I wouldn't wear the reminder forever, that I was free of any mark from Troy.

"Checking yourself out in the mirror?"

Night's voice made me jump. I looked at his reflection in the mirror, and saw he had a sexy, sleepy grin on his face.

"I can't blame you," he said. "You are incredibly beautiful."

I giggled. "You don't have to flirt with me, Night Shepherd. You already have me."

"True. You're wearing the mark to prove it."

I blushed even as I laughed harder. I loved that I would forever bear the mark of his teeth in my skin, that any wolf who looked at me would know that I was his and he was mine.

I went to the bed and sat at the foot of it. "Can we talk about all of the stuff that's going on?"

"Of course," he said. "I think there's a lot to talk about."

"I know that I'm only going to be Alpha temporarily, but I don't know what that means for the Wargs or for you."

He sat up and scooted closer to me so he could reach my back. He ran his fingers up and down my spine, making me shiver. "While you're busy being a much better Alpha to the Kings than Troy or Gregor could ever be, I'll be preparing to become Alpha after you."

I nodded. "Of course you'll want to be Alpha of both packs. I guess that means you'll combine them into one."

"That's right. It's the best way to ensure that the war between us stops."

"That makes sense...but aren't you worried about integrating them? I mean, the Kings are going to hate that, and I'm sure a lot of Wargs will be resistant, too."

He shook his head. "Taking over the Kings has always been part of the plan. Integration won't be easy, but the Wargs know it's coming. And as for your first question..."

Suddenly, he reached for my hips and pulled me down to the bed with him. I laughed as he pressed me into the sheets and peppered my face with kisses.

“We can try and endear ourselves to the Kings and make integration easier,” he said. “But we won’t be able to account for all of the pushback we’re sure to get from them.”

“I’ll help in whatever ways I can while I’m Alpha.”

“I know you will. But we can talk about that later. For now...let’s focus on us.” He kissed my lips, drawing a deep moan from me, but before we could go further, a sharp knock on the front door of the cabin interrupted us.

Night was out of bed first. I had been worried that we’d have to wear the Redwolfs’ clothes, but there was a duffel bag filled with our stuff.

“Mom thinks of everything,” he said in answer to my wide-eyed surprise.

The knock sounded again as we finished pulling on our clothes. We rushed out of the room and down the steps. Night answered the door, his body tense and ready for anything, but it was just Frankie.

She greeted me with a nod, but when she saw the mark on my neck, she pressed her lips together to hide her grin.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, Alpha Night. There were a few of us who had questions about next steps.”

“Of course.” He nodded, all business. “Bryn, you can stay—”

“I’m going with you,” I interrupted.

“Are you sure?”

“I’m positive. It’s a good opportunity to see the state of the compound, and I want to show the Kings that they didn’t just dream what happened last night. I’m their temporary Alpha, and they’ll have to accept that.”

He nodded as he considered my words. “But if you ever feel uncomfortable, we’re heading straight back here, alright?”

“Agreed.”

Outside, the sky was a periwinkle blue. Despite our intimate night, we’d woken up just after the sun started to rise. I took a deep breath, filling my lungs with fresh, clear air. It felt like such a luxury after being tied up in a cramped cave for days.

I shook my head to dispel the thought. I didn’t want that darkness on my mind right now.

“You okay?” Night asked, taking my hand.

“I am.” I smiled up at him. “Don’t worry.”

Frankie led us toward the southern side of the compound. It made sense that a lot of the Wargs would be housed there. When I had lived here, the Kings were constructing new cabins in that area.

There were a few Kings out and about, and they stopped to stare at the three of us as we walked by. Their expressions ranged from shock to curiosity to outright disgust. A few people didn't even pretend that they weren't glaring at me. I kept my head high, though I felt the burn of their gazes.

"You're doing great," Night whispered to me.

His encouragement made me smile. "Thanks, love."

As we walked through the center of the compound, I was surprised to see the amount of damage that Troy had done to the cabins and buildings there. There were many that showed fire damage or that looked like they had been ripped apart plank by plank. I recognized some of the houses as those belonging to lower-ranking wolves in the pack. It seemed that Troy was starting with the weakest wolves and working his way up the totem pole.

The hand that wasn't holding Night's clenched. *What a coward.*

"I think that's going to be the first thing on my agenda," I said, eyeing what looked like half of a charred table lying on the ground. "Reconstruction."

"I agree," Night said. "I'm surprised they haven't started on their own already."

"Me too."

"I guess this place is in need of leadership," Frankie said, glancing at me and Night over her shoulder. "It's a good thing we're here to help them pick up the pieces. *If they want that from us, I mean.*"

He squeezed my hand. "We'll offer our help as much as is needed," he said.

I squeezed his hand back. That was his way of telling me that I had the Wargs at my disposal. I had thought that would be the case, but it was comforting to have him confirm it. I was sure that we'd have some pushback from the Kings about accepting help from the Wargs, but I hoped that logic and necessity would win over the most stubborn Kings.

When we reached the southern end of the compound, we found that the Wargs had already assembled in front of one of the cabins. Tavi wasn't with them. *I guess I'll have a chance to catch up with her later on. When she's ready.*

The Wargs grinned as we approached. When they saw my mark, a few of them whistled and clapped. It made my face warm right up, but I was happy to hear their approval.

“Alright, alright, settle down,” Night said, raising his free hand. He was grinning, too. “I’m here to quickly answer your immediate questions, and then Bryn and I are headed back.”

Vince raised his hand. “How long are we going to stay on the compound before heading back home?”

“A couple more days,” Night said. “Then we’ll head back to our compound to check in. Of course, we’ll be back for the Alpha ceremony.”

Redford came next. “What do we do if we get into a conflict with the Kings?”

“You come to me if you can’t squash it,” Night said. “I don’t want any of you fighting the Kings if you can avoid it.”

Vince asked another, “Will you name your first pup after one of us?”

That earned a laugh from all of us and a playful smack from Night.

There weren’t many serious questions after that, so Night and I headed back to the Alpha cabin. I was getting antsy, and all I wanted to do was cuddle Night. It seemed he was just as eager to get back because I had to speed-walk just keep up with his long, quick gait.

The minute we entered the cabin, Night and I returned to the bedroom and immediately got under the covers again.

“Getting up that early was a mistake,” I yawned.

“Let’s never get out of bed again,” he agreed, spooning me. “Deal?”

“Deal.”

WHEN I WOKE AGAIN, it was nighttime, and I was ravenously hungry. I grabbed the shirt Night had given me last night and slipped it over my head. I knew that he and I were alone in the cabin, but I didn’t feel comfortable being naked while I wandered its halls alone. With Troy’s prying eyes and seeking hands still fresh in my memory, I didn’t want to walk around so exposed in the cabin he’d once called home—even though I knew he would never set foot inside it again.

Light on my feet, I slipped out of the bedroom to make some breakfast. Before I was a wolf, I ate hard-boiled eggs, oatmeal, a salad, or anything light and fresh and full of vegetables. But now that I was a wolf, all I wanted was meat and lots of it.

I’d never been inside the Redwolf—or, I guess, *my*—cabin before. Troy had told me that I didn’t deserve to touch such hallowed ground, and I hadn’t

wanted to be closer to him than was necessary, so I hadn't minded it being off-limits to me. Some aspects of the cabin were very beautiful—the vaulted wood ceilings, the colorful artisan tapestries that decorated the wall, the excellent rugs that lined the floor, and the crown molding. But as nice as these things were, far too much of it reminded me of Troy and his extravagant tastes.

Portraits of the Redwolf line—which was funny to say because that “line” consisted of only Gregor, Gregor's wife Nora, and Troy—were the largest pieces of art on the wall. It tugged at my heart a bit to see a young Troy held in the arms of his mother. As I made my way down the pictures, I found one that featured Nora only. Below was a plaque that listed her date of birth and her date of death. It drew a sharp gasp from me. Troy was the only one left; Nora had apparently died while Tavi and I were in captivity. Troy had never mentioned that to me.

When I thought of the person who had stood by Gregor's side all those years, I remembered a quiet woman whose eyes had always been a bit solemn. She was constantly surrounded by high-ranking female wolves, and I remembered that she wore fine jewelry and clothes, but I didn't remember ever seeing her smile or hearing her laugh. It made me wonder what she'd thought about Troy's actions. How much had she known about Night or about Gregor's history with Violet? I would probably never know.

I turned away from the portraits and the questions they left me with. The Redwolves hadn't put much stock in the fine arts unless they could directly benefit from it. Hence, the tapestries and the portraits and the vases laced with fine gold thread.

I smelled the slight musk of old books down the hall. The library! Excitement pushed me to walk faster, but as I pushed the door open, my excitement waned. There were dozens of books, but most were biographies of past Kings Alphas and their family lines, thesauruses, dictionaries, and very little of anything else. There weren't novels or books of poetry, not even an interesting memoir or an encyclopedia. The only books that I had immediate interest in were some cookbooks that dated back a couple hundred years.

Other than those, as far as I could tell, this room was little more than storage...or maybe it was for show. If the Redwolves wanted to impress someone, such as a visiting Alpha from a friendly pack, they could bring them in here to boast about the Kings' long history of battles won.

All it showed me, however, was that the Kings' Alphas had been closed

off from the rest of the world. It might have been childish of me to assume that there would be any fiction or poetry on these shelves, but it didn't make sense to me to keep only the history of the pack in the library of the Alpha's cabin. An Alpha should be appraised of all history to make sure he (or she, in my case!) followed the laws and ruled to the best of his ability.

The Alpha had the support of his beta, the Elders, and a council to keep him appraised of things, but he needed to be knowledgeable so that he wasn't constantly asking questions about how his own pack was meant to function. There were things that I knew I needed to study up on, but I wouldn't find any books here that would help.

My growling stomach urged me away from the disappointment that was the library and down the steps. The scent of vegetables and spiced jerky led me to the kitchen. If the Kings' communal kitchen was the largest I'd ever seen, and the Wargs' communal kitchen was the second, then this was a close third. There was an abundance of counter space, fine slate-gray marble laced with mica and other shiny minerals. The stainless-steel fridge was almost the same size as the industrial fridge that was used in the Kings' kitchen. I doubted that Troy would have had the patience to oversee the construction of this kitchen while he was in charge, so it seemed Gregor—or, more likely, his wife—had invested a lot of time into making this space look perfect.

I hadn't known there were any houses that had appliances other than ovens and refrigerators. But the Alpha cabin boasted an electric kettle, a microwave, a high-speed blender, and even an espresso machine. There were other appliances, too, but I couldn't even guess what their functions were. It all looked brand new, which surprised me. I would have thought that the insanely paranoid Troy would make all of his own meals—then again, I doubted he knew how to cook. If he'd had a member of his pack cook for him, they were probably ordered to keep the place spotless.

It was difficult not to feel small and out of place surrounded by all of this wealth. It occurred to me that I ought to be upset by these things, but mostly I felt overwhelmed by them. My mother and I had been denied so much—and the Wargs, too, enjoyed very few luxuries—yet here was the Alpha of the Kings, living with much, much more than others could afford.

I could only imagine how Night had felt when he walked inside the first time, seeing all of these marvels. I wouldn't keep it. I couldn't stomach the guilt. The first chance I could, I'd donate most of these appliances to the kitchen so the pack could benefit from them, too. The espresso machine

would be one of the first things to go. Neither I nor Night drank strong coffee, and I doubted either of us had the patience to try and figure out how to use it.

It took a bit of strength to open the fridge, but fortunately, the space was well-stocked with beef, pork chops, chicken, and fresh produce. I knew I wanted to make steak with an omelet that was full of fresh vegetables.

I chose the oldest-looking pans, the only nice stainless-steel skillet with a scratch in the pan, and fixed breakfast for Night and myself. I prepared two NY strip steaks for Night and one for myself. I cooked them to rare, where before I'd preferred them medium at pinkest, and I quickly chopped up some vegetables for the omelet. I hummed under my breath as I cooked, losing myself for a bit in the act of bringing my dishes to life.

When I was done, the only normal plates I found were porcelain and rimmed with gold. I grumbled to myself as I served the steaks and the omelets.

I found just the thing to complete our breakfast on the cast-iron wine rack standing in the corner of the counters. I felt no guilt as I grabbed a bottle of red wine with a name I couldn't pronounce. After all the shit this family had put me through, I think I was owed a bit of wine.

When I returned to the bedroom, I found Night sitting up with his hands stretched over his head. I had to stop and stare. The way the muscles of his arms and torso shifted under his golden, tanned skin made me weak in the knees. His body was the stuff of legends, the kind of thing that women in the romance novels I loved described as "godlike." I couldn't believe that we were both alive, together, and that we'd finally claimed each other.

How could a man like him want me forever? He opened his eyes as the door closed behind me, and smirked. Damn, if I hadn't been starving, I'd have said forget the food and take me to bed right now.

"You read my mind," he said, his voice enough to make me shiver. "Did you make steak and eggs?"

"Mm-hm." I forced myself to move forward, though I could have stood there and stared at him all day. "And wine."

"You get more and more perfect by the minute, love."

I blushed and handed him his plate and the wine before crawling into bed with him.

"Did you grab a bottle opener?" he asked.

My eyes widened. "I forgot! I'll be right back—"

“Don’t worry about it.” He used his pointer finger and pressed the cork down into the bottle. It slid into the bottle with a slight pop, and floated on top of the wine.

“My hero,” I said as he handed the wine to me for the first sip.

He winked at me.

The wine was light and fruity and a bit sweet. It tasted like something I would have enjoyed eating with chocolate. I handed the bottle back to Night and watched him take a drink. The way his Adam’s apple bobbed, the drop of wine that slipped from the corner of his mouth down the side of his neck toward the mark I had given him...oh no, he made me want to forget breakfast just for another taste of his skin.

When I let my eyes drift back up to his face, I found him watching me, eyes bright with amusement. I quickly looked away, my heart beating fast against my ribcage.

“You have to catch me up,” I said quickly.

“Oh?”

“Yes! I’ve been gone from our pack for so long. I want to know how everyone is.”

“*Our* pack?” He grinned.

I took a large bite of my steak. “Don’t tease me,” I muttered around the mouthful.

He chuckled and ate his breakfast more slowly. “Everyone is fine, but they were worried sick about you. They really felt your loss around dinner time.”

I swallowed and smiled. It was nice to hear that the Wargs cared about me the way I cared about them. After days spent in darkness and isolation, I’d started to believe that I had imagined their kindness, or that it had come from pity.

“What about Tavi?” I asked.

Night hesitated, and worry spiked through me. The last time I’d seen her, she had been cuddled close to Dom’s chest, and she had been acting nothing like herself.

“Don’t sugarcoat it for me,” I said. “I want to know the truth.”

He nodded. “I’m sure this isn’t a surprise to you, but she wasn’t in great shape when we arrived. According to Doc, she’s suffering from wounds that hurt her deeper than we can see.”

I let out a breath. *What did those monsters do to my friend?* “Have you

seen her yet?”

“Not yet,” he said, “but she’s still here in Kings’ territory. *Your* territory.”

I felt a brief thrill at hearing Night acknowledge that the Kings’ grounds were mine.

“Where is she?”

“The last I heard from Dom, she’s staying in a cabin not far from here, resting. My mom is with her; she arrived today while we were sleeping. Doc is with them, too.”

That set my mind at ease. Though we didn’t know much more about Tavi’s condition, at least Violet and Doctor Stan were with her. I would have been worried about them if not for the fact that I’d seen the way Dom behaved around Tavi. I knew that she and Violet were safe with him around.

“Good.” I finished off my steak and then my eggs. From the corner of my eye, I noticed Night watching me in that intent, careful way of his, making me feel fragile and precious. It felt wonderful having so much of his attention, but it also caught me off-guard and made my pulse beat faster. I was so in love with him I hardly knew what to do with myself in his presence. I bit my lip, racking my brain for something more to say.

“And how is Violet?” I asked.

“Her Alpha wound is healing. It’ll scar her for the rest of her life, but she should make a full recovery.”

I nodded. It still haunted me—the way her blood had gushed, the sound of her body hitting the ground—but once I saw her, I was sure I’d feel a bit better about everything.

“Oh! What about Pax?” I’d completely forgotten about the pup. He’d tried so hard to save my life, only for him to fall right into Troy’s clutches.

“He didn’t even have a scratch on him. I know he misses you like crazy. The last I heard from his mother, he was picking books from the library for you to read to him.”

I laughed. “I can’t wait.”

“Do you have any other pressing questions, love?”

“Ah.” My face warmed. I guess I wasn’t being as subtle as I’d hoped. “U-um, the garden?”

“It’s doing fine.” He smiled around the top of the bottle and downed a few swallows.

“And Mable?”

“She’s healthy and, like I said, feeling your loss in the kitchen.”

“R-right. Then, um...”

Night laughed, setting the bottle on the nightstand before settling under the covers. He tugged at my arm and pulled me after him. I caught myself on my elbow and looked down at him. He was so handsome, so present, so masculine. He smoothed his hand over my jaw and buried his fingers in my hair.

“You’re adorable,” he said, pulling me down for a long kiss. When he pulled back, his eyes glowed a gentle chartreuse. “I want to have our ceremony soon,” he murmured.

I blinked and tilted my head to the side. “You mean the Alpha ceremony?”

He smiled and shook his head. “No, love, I mean *our* ceremony. I want to make you mine in front of the Kings, the Wargs, and the whole fucking world.”

My mouth opened and shock trembled through me. He was serious! I’d seen a wolf ceremony only once before, when Mom and I had prepared the food for a celebration when I was thirteen. From what I remembered, the ceremony had involved a lot of flowers, tons of food, and mostly homemade gifts from the attendees. The couple had dressed up for the occasion, as did those in attendance, and there were tons of desserts and dancing.

These celebrations differed from human weddings I’d read about in romance novels; there wasn’t an exchange of rings, the “bride” didn’t have to wear white, and there weren’t any rituals like throwing the bouquet or the removal of a garter belt by a blindfolded “groom.” Still, Night was essentially proposing to me now. He was telling me that he wanted to show the Kings and the Wargs our claiming marks so they would know that we belonged to each other.

Tears filled my eyes. It hadn’t been long since Night and I had met for the first time, but in a lot of ways, it felt like he’d been in my life all along.

“So, what do you say, Bryn?” he asked.

“Yes! Of course I say yes!” I threw my arms around him, and he laughed, taking my weight.

“You’ve got five days to plan this thing, baby, because I want to make this official the day after your Alpha ceremony.”

That wasn’t a ton of time to plan, but I didn’t care. “Why can’t it happen tonight?” I asked.

“Aren’t you eager?” He kissed me again, longer, slower this time. “I want

to give the Wargs at least *some* time to come see us.”

“They’ll be there, too?”

“Some of them, I’m sure. Everyone has been missing you, so they’ll definitely want to congratulate us.”

“How wonderful.” I let out a long, happy sigh. It seemed like all the pieces of our lives were finally falling together. I was claimed, Night was here, and soon we’d be bound in front of our closest friends.

He ran his hand up and down my side, stirring a different kind of hunger in me. “*You’re* wonderful, Bryn,” he murmured.

When I lifted my head for another kiss, I tasted an answering hunger on his tongue. I hooked a leg over his hip, and he held it there under my thigh. His skin was so hot under my fingers, it was like his blood was made of fire.

“Night,” I said between kisses. “I want you inside me again.”

His answering laugh was deep and rumbling. “Turn around for me baby and press that ass up against me.”

I turned on my other side, and he pulled me up against him. I immediately felt his cock pressing to my back. He wasn’t fully hard yet, but I knew I could fix that. I ground my ass up and down his length and enjoyed the sounds of his sighing pleasure. He pushed up my shirt to take my right breast in his hand, while his other hand snaked around my waist to reach down between my legs.

I groaned, biting my lip as he stroked my pussy. His rubbing, caressing fingers moved in an alternating rhythm to the one I used to grind against him. All the while, he continued to fondle my breast and pinch my nipple.

I reached behind myself to take his cock in my hand. I could feel each vein, each twitch, each sticky bead of precum. I wished I could taste the salt of it and feel it melting on my tongue. Just the thought of it sent my first orgasm of the day rushing to meet me.

He latched onto my mark, and each suck and stroke of his tongue sent fresh, shivering ecstasy through my body. It was so intense, it brought tears spilling from my eyes. As the sweet aftershock thrummed through me, Night released my breast so he could lift my leg, exposing me to the relatively cool air of the bedroom. He panted my name as he pushed up inside me. I cried out at the sudden intrusion, my body stretching for him. The slight pain only heightened the intensity and pleasure of it all.

He wrapped my leg back around his hip and held it there as he continued to thrust inside and his other hand continued to rub and circle my clit. He

nuzzled my neck, sending hot electricity through my body as he brushed my mark.

“Oh, fffuuckkk...” I groaned. “Niiight.”

“That’s right, Bryn, tell me how much you love this *dick*.” He punctuated the demand with a sharp thrust.

“Ah! Yes! Your cock—it’s too good!” I stretched my arms up and reached behind me to touch him, to hold him even closer. “Night, don’t stop, don’t stop!”

I didn’t need to ask. Those wicked fingers of his teased another orgasm out of me, and as it shuddered through my body, Night flipped us, putting me down on all fours. He took hold of the back of my neck and pressed me down into the mattress. He pulled out to the tip and thrust back in. I screamed, my nails sharpening to tear through the sheets and into the mattress. More tears soaked into the covers.

I felt his own wolf’s claws in my hip and poking into the skin at the back of my throat, teasing the edge of my claiming mark. Each thrust was an achingly wonderful punishment. It felt like he was entering me deeper and deeper each time, pushing the limits of my body as far as they could go. This was Night the Alpha who was fucking me, the man I’d spotted lurking just behind the amused twinkle in his eyes or that wolfish smile. He had kept this side of him hidden from me for too long. My only regret was that I hadn’t met this encompassing, delicious man sooner.

I screamed a second time as a third orgasm ripped through me. His cock twitched inside me as I clenched tight around him, and with a deep growl, he came. I’d thought he came a lot last night, but that was nothing compared to this. His hot seed filled me, and kept filling me. It flooded me until I felt it seeping out from around his twitching cock and down the inside of my leg.

He thrust a few more times until he, spent, collapsed next to me. He gathered me close, and I curled into him. Both of us were panting in the wake of that incredible session.

He caressed the side of my face and lifted my chin to meet his gaze. “Too much?” he asked, wiping a stray tear from my cheek with his thumb.

“No,” I said, luxuriating in the feeling of his cum still dripping from me. My voice was slightly hoarse from screaming, but it would recover soon. “No, it was just right.”

He chuckled and pressed a sweet kiss to my lips. “Then maybe next time, I won’t hold back.”

I gasped. “You were *holding back*?”

He grinned in response.

A sweet, anticipatory shiver traced down my spine. If that was him holding back, then I couldn’t imagine what it would feel like when he let loose. Every time I thought I was close to understanding the kind of man Night was, he surprised me all over again. My amazing, wonderful, sexy mate never stopped dazzling me.

NIGHT

Unfortunately, I couldn't stay in bed with Bryn forever. My pack needed me, and I needed to head back home the next morning. I gave Bryn a long goodbye kiss before Dom, myself, and a few others shifted to make the trek.

As we ran, I glanced at Dom. I had noticed that he had grown quieter ever since we found Tavi and Bryn.

"Are you alright, Dom?" I asked.

"I'm fine," he replied.

"You seem quiet."

"I've just got some shit on my mind, Night. I'm fine."

Clearly, he wasn't fine at all. Whatever was weighing down his thoughts must have been pretty serious, but it was obvious that he didn't want to talk about it. I wouldn't push him to tell me, unless it interfered with his work. And if it came to that, then it must be life or death shit.

For the time being, I tried to ignore my curiosity. We made it to Wargs pack lands in just a few hours, and on the way, I called ahead for everyone to gather in a pack-wide assembly.

Now that I'd claimed Bryn, my strength had returned several times over. I was able to reach the minds of my closest wolves even a few miles away from the pack lands. It was a noticeable boost to my power, and I wasn't sure if this was because I'd finally claimed my soulmate or if it was because Bryn was a descendant of the pack mothers or if this was all just in my head. Whatever the case was, I wouldn't complain about this burst of power.

Once we reached Wargs territory, we shifted and put on clothes before

meeting everyone else at the training grounds. Hundreds of Wargs chatted amongst themselves as Dom and I leapt onto the Elders' roof. We used to have a podium, but we didn't often have pack-wide assemblies, so the wood used to make the podium was repurposed for other projects. The next best thing was just to stand on top of the Elders' cabin, It provided a nice view over those gathered, and the pack could easily gather around it to see me.

"Everyone," I said, "I have a couple of important announcements."

My pack quieted, until only the occasional fussing of the youngest pups was heard.

"There have been some major developments. First, we found Bryn and Octavia, and both of them are safe."

I paused as applause and cheers of relief spread across the crowd. It warmed me to see how much my pack cared for my mate and my sister. I wished Bryn could have been here to see it herself; I could imagine her blushing and smiling from the pack's excitement.

"Second, Troy is no longer Alpha of the Kings. Bryn defeated him during the challenge ceremony."

Surprised gasps sounded through the crowd, but these gasps were nothing like the derisive, hissing words that the Kings lobbed Bryn's way.

"What does that mean, Alpha?" one of the onlookers asked. "Is Bryn the Alpha for the Kings now?"

"Temporarily. Until the Elders can come up with a new method of determining the official Alpha."

More gasps and more questions, but there were too many voices speaking at once to answer them easily. I didn't ask for their silence; I'd expected this reaction from them. As far as they'd known, I was supposed to assume control of the Kings pack. Only my most trusted wolves were aware of how weak I'd been leading up to the challenge, and only Jasper and Dom had seen what had happened in the ring between Troy and Bryn.

It was better to let them get their initial reactions out before taking control of the crowd again.

Eventually, my pack quieted and a few among them began to ask questions on behalf of the group.

"What happens next for the Kings and the Wargs?"

"I'm not sure," I said. "I'm planning on meeting with the Kings Elders and their council to determine next steps. I imagine there will be another challenge ceremony, but I'm not sure if there will be extra rules or limitations

on the wolves who can participate. If I can, I will absolutely toss my hat into the ring.”

“Why aren’t *you* the one who defeated Troy?” This question contained some level of bitterness, of doubt. “Why aren’t *you* the Alpha of the Kings now?”

Though I was prepared for such a question, it still stung a bit. “Redwolf kidnapped Bryn after she and I had mated but before I could claim her. The challenge he proposed was one that would assure his own victory. In my weakened state, it took longer for me to kill him, and during the fight, I had to give my team enough time to locate Bryn and Octavia.”

Another speaker shouted, “You promised us more land, a better life, and so far you haven’t delivered in the decade you’ve been our Alpha!”

That question was met with another wolf who snapped, “Shut your mouth! You should have stepped up to the plate if you think you could do better. Where were you when Night took over the pack on his own as a *teenager*?”

The responder silenced the person who’d spoken up, but not the next person, who shouted, “We don’t have half of the wealth that the Kings enjoy, and we don’t have a river, either! When are you going to deliver on what you swore you’d give us?”

There were more voices in support of me, but there were also murmured agreements and nods from the few who agreed with that critique. This stung even more than the question about why I wasn’t yet Alpha of the Kings. I hadn’t realized how deep my pack’s dissatisfaction went. It made me wonder if they’d always felt this way and I just hadn’t been aware, or if hearing that the plans had changed again made them justifiably angry.

I’d left too many of my pack wanting, and now I was paying the price. They had waited for me to make my move, but the opportunity had passed by twice with no results. I was walking in a gray area, and I wished I had a definitive timeline for them, but until I learned what the Kings’ Elders had in mind for the ceremony, I wouldn’t.

I waited, listening to the complaints that I could hear, and then raised my hands, bringing them all to silence. “It’s still my goal to bring us a better life,” I assured them. “We are closer than we ever have been to taking over the Kings and combining the packs. We just need to see this through. Then the Kootenai will be ours, and that hoarded wealth will be shared.

“I know that it isn’t easy to wait,” I told them. “I know that our conflicts

with the Kings stretch further back than any of us have been alive, and I know that we've been waiting that long for our fair share of the land. That same dissatisfaction encouraged me to take control of this pack, and I promised to dedicate my life to seeing our betterment as a pack. That is still what I aim to accomplish.

"For now, until the Kings' Elders come up with a solution to the temporary Alpha issue, I don't have a concrete answer or timeline for the exact moment that I will have control of the Kings. But I can promise you that the time is soon. And I want you all to know that I am fighting for us all. You all *are* my priority."

There was a pause, and then a short round of applause. I still sensed some dissatisfaction, but that was unavoidable. But at least I'd reestablished my priorities to them, and I'd reminded them of the victory that was right on the horizon. I would rather them be informed and dissatisfied than uninformed and blissfully ignorant. I wouldn't lie to my pack or sugarcoat the truth for them. That wasn't the way I wanted to run things.

"I'd like to end this on a high note, and give my final announcement," I said. "Bryn is officially my mate, and our binding ceremony will take place on Kings pack lands in four days' time. If you're able to make it, the entire pack is invited."

"Why on the Kings' land and not our own?" someone asked.

"The most important reason is that Bryn won't be able to leave Kings pack lands while she adjusts to being the temporary Alpha." There was so much she needed to learn in order to properly run such a large pack, especially when it could take weeks or even a few months before there was a decision about who would take her place. "The subsidiary but also important reasons are," I added with a smile, "that her mother lives in the Kings' territory, and Bryn wants to have the ceremony in the garden that the two of them made together."

Talking about Bryn seemed to calm the pack a bit further, which worked well for me. At least I was ending this contentious meeting with some good news.

"You are all dismissed to enjoy the rest of your day," I said. "If you have concerns that you didn't feel comfortable addressing in front of everyone, know that I am open to your questions and your comments. I have always wanted an open line of communication between me and my pack, so if you're angry, let me know. If you're hurting, express that hurt to me. I am available

when you need me.”

The crowd began to disperse, and I reached out to my closest wolves to stay behind. I needed to speak with them about next steps. Dom and I hopped off the roof and walked with the inner circle to the conference room in the mess hall. Everyone took their seats, but after that meeting, I was still a bit wired with energy. I elected to stand against the wall instead. Dom followed my lead, standing nearby.

“What do you all know about the Kings’ elite fighters and hunters?” I asked. “And what have I missed since being out of the loop?”

“You weren’t just out of the loop, sir,” Frankie said, a small smirk on her face. “You were off getting cozy with your mate.”

The reminder of Bryn and our blissful time together made me smile. Being separated from her like this, while necessary, was close to torturous. But I knew I’d see her again soon for her Alpha ceremony, and then our binding would take place.

“Oh, what a smile,” Kai said. “I guess there’s no mystery about what went on between you two while you were away.”

“I hope you won’t hold it against us, but we started keeping a running bet of how many days would pass before you came back, Alpha,” Vince added.

“I wish I could’ve been in on that,” Dom said. The ghost of his usual snicker lifted his lips, which relaxed me a bit.

“Who won?” I asked, chuckling.

“Redford.”

“That’s right.” The winning wolf grinned and leaned back in his chair. “These wolves owe me dinner the next time we head to Colville.”

“It’s not fair that he won,” Frankie said. “The rest of us figured you’d be too lovestruck to let your mate out of your sight for at least a week.”

“If I could trust any of you to run the pack in my stead, you would’ve been right,” I said.

“Damn.” She banged her hand on the table.

It was a relief to laugh and let off a bit of steam with my pack. For just a little while, I could forget about how uncertain our future was.

Eventually, the joviality quieted, and the group filled me in on what they knew.

“According to our reports,” William said, “some of the Kings pack hunters left after Troy lost the challenge.”

My wolf growled low as my lips pulled away from my teeth. Deserting

your pack after a change in leadership was a clear sign of disrespect. I hated that Bryn would need to reckon with that if she hadn't already.

"We know how you feel, Night," Dom said, "but this wasn't a surprise."

"True," William added. "Honestly, it's more of a surprise that less than half of them left. I guess Redwolf made their lives a lot worse than we thought."

"So why did any of them leave?" I asked.

"As far as we can tell, it's because Troy let them off their leashes. They were able to be more violent with the pack and they could eat as much of their kills as they wanted, even if that meant others had to pick up the slack."

"With him imprisoned, they wouldn't be able to keep that up," Frankie nodded. "Also, given how sexist the Kings are, the ones who left wouldn't be willing to listen to a female, even if it was only temporary."

I echoed her annoyed sigh with one of my own. I accepted this reasoning, even though it pissed me off. Now we had to worry about violent wolves roaming the forest. Allowing them to go unchecked meant there would be a team of ferals who were trained in how to fight. Their odds of surviving to make violent attacks on unsuspecting shifters or humans was far too high.

"About your suggestion to merge the packs," Tyrell began, "that's not going to go over well with the remaining elite within the Kings pack."

Jasper nodded, adding, "They won't be willing to submit to just anyone."

I sighed. "I know, but we'll have to handle those issues as they come up. We can try to predict the problem areas to catch anything before it arises, but we won't be able to predict everything."

"What do you want to do about the wolves who defected?" Dom asked.

"If Bryn isn't already aware of it, I think we should keep that quiet for now."

He raised a brow. "She's going to notice that she's short a few wolves before long."

"She's got enough on her plate just learning how to run the pack. I'll tell her soon, but I don't want her to worry about that yet."

The conversation was over as far as the others knew, but Dom entered my mind to say, "*She deserves to know, Night. Keeping her in the dark is like keeping her from playing with a full deck of cards.*"

"I hear what you're saying, but I'm worried that she's going to be consumed with pack duties. Knowing her and the way the Kings treated her when she was human, I think she might try to prove to them that she's worthy

of her title—and she is. But I don't want her to get in too deep and burn out."

As the team continued to talk amongst themselves, I was the only one who noticed the way Dom rolled his eyes. That was a show of defiance that Dom rarely publicly indulged in. It was more disrespectful than I was used to from him.

"I can muddle my way through your reasoning, Alpha Night, but I think we both know what happens when you ignore the needs of the woman you love."

That was a step too far. I whipped my head toward him, and I was ready to fucking put him in his place when a question interrupted me.

"Alpha, what do you need from us?" Jasper asked. "I mean, to make the merger as successful as possible."

I forced myself to tamp down on the urge to snap at Dom and addressed the table. "We all need to do what we can to learn as much as possible about the Kings. The plan has always been to combine the packs to end the centuries-long feud between us, but it's going to take a lot of blood, sweat, and tears to make that a reality. While on the Kings' territory, we should keep abreast of their needs and shortcomings, too, to make our merger as appealing to them as possible. I need your support, your patience, and your expertise on my side." I shot a look at Dom as I said the last sentence, but he didn't make eye contact with me.

My wolves sent nods of agreement around the table. "We'll follow you anywhere, Alpha," Kai said. "You've done more than enough to earn our loyalty."

Their votes of confidence stilled some of the irritation roiling in my blood. I had no idea what the future of the Wargs would look like, but I was determined to make sure it was a bright and fruitful one. From the corner of my eye, I watched Dom peel away from the wall and leave the conference room.

Maybe I was right to be worried about this thing that was eating at him.

BRYN

While Night was away, I was left to prepare myself for both the Alpha ceremony and the binding ceremony. I couldn't keep myself from wringing my hands every few seconds as I paced in the living room of the Alpha's cabin.

I knew why I was unsettled—Night was gone, I was alone in this huge cabin, I was on the Kings pack lands, I had a meeting with the Elders in a few hours, and even though Night and I'd had sex in the bedroom and many of the other rooms in the house, the place still stank of Troy a little. It made me queasy every time I got an unexpected whiff of him, and it caused my thoughts to jumble together when I needed them to be linear.

I wished I had Night beside me again. Sure, he would distract me with those wonderful little kisses and the wicked things he could do with his fingers and tongue, but he also grounded me. Alone, I felt like I was being sucked up in a tornado. I hadn't even been able to leave the cabin I was in such a state.

A knock on the door brought me up short.

For a moment, I worried that Troy had escaped from the cells and come to drug me and kidnap me all over again. But as I approached the door, the familiar scent of earth and lavender greeted me.

I threw open the door, exclaiming, "Mom!"

She grinned and pulled me in for a tight hug. Mom was just as I remembered—long, silky white hair, laughing brown eyes, and an embrace that was just as warm and comforting as it had always been—and I sighed into her shoulder.

“Hey, baby,” she said, rubbing my back. “I figured you would be in need of a distraction. Care to come with me to the garden?”

“Yes!” I couldn’t imagine a better place for me to be right now.

It was mid-morning as we walked to the community gardens, and my eyes widened at the sight of the weeds and shriveled growth. Mom, seeing my surprise, nodded sadly.

“Troy’s evil did a number on the land, Bryn,” she said. “All the blood he spilled, all the terrible things he did in the name of this pack...” she trailed off, shaking her head. “There is little he can do to make amends for this damage. I tried to do what I could, and I saved a lot of what we cultivated, but without my girl at my side, I couldn’t save all of it.”

I looked up at her. “Mom, I’m sure you did better than I could ever have done.”

She gave me a smile. “I’m not so sure, baby. I have a connection to the land that lets me sense the way it feels and the things it wants, but Bryn, you’ve always had an affinity for plants and growth. Even when you were just a toddler, you were tugging on my leg to tell me when a plant was thirsty or hungry. You were always a little prodigy.”

I blushed under her praise. “Mom, you never told me any of that.”

“I know.” She took my hand. “It never felt like the right time.”

We walked together into the garden, and she handed me my old gardening gloves, apron, and rain boots. I donned all of my old stuff, savoring the way the fabric gloves tickled over the backs of my hand as I grabbed my usual trowel and small shovel. Mom suited up, and we both crouched low to the ground to begin weeding.

“You know,” Mom began, “I had a feeling you would be safe with the Wargs.”

I glanced at her. “But Mom, every time the Wargs came up in the past, you would tell me about how dangerous they were.”

She nodded. “I’d always believed that was true. But after Troy came through the village, stuttering about how you were kidnapped by the Wargs’ Alpha and taken prisoner, I started to suspect that there was more to the Wargs than I’d given them credit for. For one thing, as much as I missed you, I wasn’t worried about you as much as I thought I should be. Something was telling me that you were somewhere safe and secure.”

“Really?” With the Wargs, I’d worried so much about Mom and how she was taking the news of my being gone. It eased some tension to know that

she'd at least been able to sleep at night. "I'm glad there was something telling you I was okay."

"Me too." She shot a mischievous look at me. "I guess you can't pretend anymore that this mystical stuff doesn't exist, huh?"

I laughed at the tease. "Well, Mom, I guess I can't deny that. When I consider all the stuff I've found out about myself, I have to agree."

She smiled and dug out another weed with her trowel. "Could you...tell me about that night? I've been worrying myself sick about what kinds of awful things might have happened to you."

So, I told her the truth about the day Night had saved me. I admitted that I had been planning on leaving the pack to get away from Troy, and I told her about him drugging me and keeping me in his bedroom. I glossed over the most intimate, scary bits, not wanting her to worry about me.

"So, you were planning on running away that night," she said to herself. "I worried you might do that, and I know I did a lot to talk you out of staying." She stuck her trowel into the soil and wiped the dirt from her gloves. "I should have run away with you, Bryn."

It surprised me to hear her say that. "I wouldn't have asked you to do that for me, Mom. This place, this land...you have roots here. I could never have asked you to come with me."

"I know you wouldn't have; that's why I should have insisted on going along, too. I realize now that I was so shortsighted. I was sure that there was a place in the pack for you, one that neither of us were aware of, but all I did was make you feel like you had to hide your plans from me. I pushed you right into harm's way, Bryn."

"Oh, Mom, don't say that." It made my chest ache to see how sad she was. "You had faith in me when nobody else did. You were always in my corner, and I know that if you suspected even for a moment that Troy would chain me up in his bedroom to do who knows what to me, you would have gone with me in a heartbeat."

She gave a sad sigh. "But why didn't I see it? I should have had some indication of the danger."

I reached over to touch the back of her gloved hand. "If you were me, I think you would tell me it was because the spirits didn't want you to know."

She paused, and then burst into laughter. I joined her, and she turned her hand under mine to intertwine our fingers briefly before we resumed gardening. We sat in companionable silence, plucking at weeds.

Eventually, I came across a particularly stubborn weed. I got annoyed trying to dig it out with my trowel, which seemed too imprecise for the job, and finally plucked off my glove, my hand already forming into a claw, and buried my hand in the loose soil. I followed the root of the weed down a few more inches and then lifted it up, only to find it wasn't a weed at all, but a large radish that had dug itself deeply into the soil.

"Whoa!" I said, shaking the dirt off my hand. "Look at this thing! I hope my claws didn't damage it too much."

Mom gasped and caught hold of my hand. She stared at my claws, still covered with dirt. "My, my. I can't say I thought I'd ever see the day that you were able to do this." She let go of my hand, her eyes bright with excitement. "Please, tell me about your wolf and your first shift."

I launched into that story next, but left out the fact that it had happened right after Night and I had made love for the first time. I did tell her that he had been with me at the time, and about how he had helped me.

She pressed her hand to her heart and sighed. "I wish I could have been there to see it, or that your wolf had felt she was able to come out while I was around. But true love was the only catalyst for her, I suppose."

"The Wargs' Elders and Violet told me that my wolf locked herself away to protect me from the trauma of losing my birth mom."

"I see."

"They also told me that I'm a descendant of the original pack mothers." I added that a bit quieter, because it still seemed like something that was meant to happen to someone who deserved that sort of honor, not me. "I guess they have a plan for me, but whatever it is, it's hidden to us."

Mom nodded. She didn't seem at all surprised to hear this news about me. "These things always work on their own time, not ours. But I knew that I was always meant to find you in the forest, Bryn. I knew you were meant for something more." After a pause, she pushed a stray strand of hair out of her face and gave me a shy look. "Can I see your wolf?"

"I thought you'd never ask." I grinned.

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. It still took me a few seconds to reach my wolf, but every time I shifted, that time got shorter and shorter. Soon, I knew, I'd be able to do it at will just like any other shifter. The change came over me more quickly, too—my wolf was eager to let our mother see her.

I shook the clothes off of my body as I shifted and got up on my hind

legs. I did a turn for Mom, who clapped harder and laughed.

“Bryn, you are even more gorgeous in the sunlight,” she told me, wiping a stray tear from her cheek. “My baby, a shifter. It’s like a miracle.”

I dropped back onto all fours and pushed my nose into her neck. She giggled as my cold, wet nose poked her. She scratched me behind the ears and under the chin, and my tongue lolled out. She giggled again and got to her feet and led me inside my childhood home to my room, a place I’d been certain that I’d never see again.

“I had the scouts bring this back from Colville for the day when I would see you again,” she said, pulling a shimmery, peach sheath dress from my bed. “You can change into this when you’re ready to—”

I was already shifting back to my human form before she finished speaking. I took the dress from her. I couldn’t tell what iridescent fabric had been used to give the dress this shimmery look, but I loved the way it caught the light. I slipped it on, and the fabric settled like cool liquid over my skin.

I looked at myself in the mirror, still in the same spot I liked to keep it, and admired the way the dress suited me. Mom had such an eye for this.

“Let’s get some tea and continue our chat,” she said. “I made up a rosehip green tea that I think you’ll love.”

Minutes later, I found that Mom was right; this tea was exactly what I needed. The rosy aroma complimented the mellow flavor of the green tea leaves perfectly. At our dining table, I let myself sink into the cup and told her about the friends I’d made in the Wargs, including Dom, Tavi, Violet, and Pax. I told my mother how welcoming everyone had been but that I missed her terribly.

She smiled at me. She had her elbows on the dining table, and she cradled her head in her hands.

“Tell me about the man who hugged you in the middle of the arena,” she said. “I’m sure he’s the one who gave you that bite.”

I touched the mark on my neck. My face burned red, but I was eager to talk about the love of my life. “Night is the one I’ve been telling you about,” I said. “The man who saved me from Troy, and who was there for me when I shifted for the first time.”

“Oh, honey, you’ve barely started talking about him, but already you are *glowing*.” She covered her smile with her hands. Her giggle was infectious, and it made my heart fill with warmth. “I can’t wait to meet this man officially.”

“Well, that shouldn’t take long. He’ll be here for the Alpha ceremony—and for the binding ceremony.” I added that last bit quietly, but of course Mom heard me.

She gasped and sputtered, but before she could get out her questions, there was a knock on her door. Once again, the sound of it took me back to the moments leading up to Troy’s kidnapping me. I hopped to my feet before my mom and crossed the room to the front door in a few quick strides. I threw open the door and found Tavi and Violet standing there.

“Violet!” I screamed, throwing my arms around Violet and holding her fiercely to my chest.

“It’s good to see you too, girlie,” she said, hugging me back just as tight. “Congrats on your temporary role. You really, literally earned it.”

I laughed as I let her go. Her hair was gray and gathered into one thick braid down her back, and her eyes were every bit as vibrant as ever. The only difference was the paleness to her skin and the black veins that spread from the locus of Troy’s bite. It angered me to see it, to remember who had put it there, but now wasn’t the time to dwell on those sorts of sad things.

“What about me?” Tavi jumped in. “I think I should get at least two hugs.”

I turned to her and gathered her into my arms carefully, hugging her just as fiercely as I had hugged Violet. I could sense that Tavi hadn’t fully recovered. Her hug was weaker than I was used to, and there was a slight, trembling fragility to her that I didn’t understand. When I pulled back to look at her, I found her features bold and beautiful as ever, but her dark brown eyes were haunted. It was obvious that it took a lot for her to be here, even though the woman I knew usually jumped at the opportunity to meet new people or to hang out.

I wanted to ask her so many questions, the one standing out most prominently in my mind being, “*What did those sons of bitches do to you?*” But I knew it wasn’t the time to ask her all of that. I would talk to her when it was just the two of us and we had some privacy.

As things were, I pulled her in for a second, quick hug, and took her hand. I led her and Violet into my mother’s cabin, to where Mom had already prepared two more steaming cups of tea. I noticed Tavi eyeing her cup with appreciation.

“Mom,” I said, “this is Tavi, my best friend, and this is Violet, Night’s mother, and the woman who protected me the way I know you would have if

you had been with me. Tavi, Violet, this is my mom, Glenda Hunter.”

“Aha,” Violet said, walking up to my mother. “I’ve heard so much about you, but it’s good to finally put a face to a name.” She stuck out her hand. “We’ll have to share gardening tips with each other.”

Mom laughed and took Violet’s hand. “I agree. It’s always nice to get to know another woman who isn’t afraid to get to know her land.”

They each had a twinkle in their eye as they shared smiles. I watched as the woman who had raised me shook hands with the two women who had kept me sane and accepted me when I needed it most, and my heart swelled with joy.

I took my seat among them, and the four of us began to chat.

BRYN

The next day, Violet and I walked together to the Elders' cabin to speak with them about the Alpha ceremony. It was a clear, shiny day, which clashed with the nervous storm brewing in my mind. I knew the Wargs' Elders were lovely, but I had no idea what the Kings' Elders were like. They'd never cared about me before, and maybe that dispassion would continue through this meeting.

As we walked, I shot a nervous glance at Violet. She was on the Wargs' council and worked closely with the Wargs' Elders, so she would know tons about the goings-on of Elders, and she would help me understand things I was confused about or misunderstood. I needed her in my corner.

"Don't worry, Bryn," Violet said. "This meeting is going to go by easily."

"I'm glad you're so confident," I said with a laugh. "I can't seem to get myself under control."

"Have faith, girlie," she said. "We've got this."

I took a deep breath and tried to walk a little taller, but when we arrived at the Elders' white cabin, my hand trembled when I lifted it to knock on the door.

The door opened almost immediately, which startled me. "You two are right on time," said an Elder with wavy black hair. "Follow me inside."

Violet, unbothered, walked in after him, and I followed a bit more slowly after her. The walls and floors were painted white and left unadorned. The floor creaked underneath us as we went down a long corridor and into a small room, where the other two Elders stood waiting for us. The room was sparsely furnished, aside from a long, rectangular, varnished pine wood table

and six chairs made from the same wood.

All three Elders were male and wore simple linens. Elder Sage was probably in his late seventies, and he was the one who had done most of the talking the day of the challenge ceremony. The top of his head was bald and shiny, but his jaw was covered in a thick, silver beard that was almost long enough to braid.

Elder Queene appeared to be the youngest and tallest of the three. He was the one who'd answered the door. He might have been in his early sixties, and he boasted a full head of thick wavy hair. He towered over Violet and me. He might have even been taller than Night.

Finally, Elder Forsythe was clean-shaven with thinning gray hair and a jagged scar that cut across his nose. It was difficult to tell who was older between Elder Forsythe and Elder Sage just based on the way they looked and the number of wrinkles on their faces, but something about Elder Forsythe's air told me that he had several years on Elder Sage.

"We're pleased to be here," Violet said, curtsying.

"Yes," I said, following her lead. I could have raided Troy's mother's closet for clothes, but I hadn't wanted to do that. Instead, I chose my outfit from the clothes my mom and I had available to us. I'd found a pair of slacks that had needed to be hemmed, and a blouse that was only a size too big for me. Something about wearing these simple clothes felt more right to me.

As we straightened, the Elders inclined their heads in acknowledgement. They gestured for Violet and me to take a seat, and we obliged them. After we were seated on one end of the square table, they took the chairs on the other side.

"We wanted to inform you of the ceremony," Elder Sage said. "It's fairly straightforward; all you need to do is make a vow to the pack, a vow to the spirits of the pack mothers, and a vow to yourself. Afterward, you will bind your vows with your blood and throw it into the fire. And then you will announce your beta, who will swear fealty to you."

"Mmhm," Violet nodded. "After that, we can all party."

Her addition startled the Elders, but none of them disagreed.

The word "beta" stood out to me. Though I hadn't thought about who would take the position, a name immediately came to mind—Octavia Black. Of course, it was possible that Tavi wasn't the best person for the position or that she'd refuse to take it. The girl I had known a few weeks ago would have nominated herself as my beta, but I had no idea how she would react to the

suggestion now.

I tried to consider other people for the job. I couldn't have Night or Dom, obviously, and it was too demanding a position to give to Mom, who also had the pack garden to worry about. Violet wouldn't be good for similar reasons.

There was the female wolf, Frankie. She seemed strong and intelligent, but I didn't really know her, and I wouldn't feel right having one of Night's group of elites in my circle. As much as I loved Night and trusted him and his people, I needed a beta who would put *me* first as their Alpha. Frankie was loyal to Night first, so I would always be second. Of course choosing someone from another pack would come with its own set of problems too—

“Alpha Hunter?” Elder Queene asked.

I blinked. I'd let my mind wander off. “I'm sorry, what were you saying, Elder?”

“As I was saying, I'm sure you don't need a reminder of this, but your position is only temporary because a female cannot be the Alpha of the pack. However, because you won the challenge, you will have the option to stay on as Den Mother if you so choose.”

“What does that mean exactly?” I asked.

“It means essentially that you will have a seat on the council. You will still be involved in the pack and in future decisions.”

“I see.” I tried to contain my excitement, but I was sure they could hear the hard beating of my heart. I had never wanted to be Alpha, but I was willing to do anything I could to help the pack. They might not appreciate me or even like me, but they were still the people I grew up with, and I wanted to make sure the good ones in the pack and the pups had a good life.

“How will the choosing of the new Alpha go?” I asked.

“I am curious about that myself,” Violet said. “I've never heard of this situation happening before. I brought all relevant historical texts from our library with me, but none of them mentioned this.”

The Elders raised their eyebrows, obviously impressed with her knowledge.

“I'm not surprised,” Elder Sage said. “This situation is quite rare, but we've come up with a solution that we believe will satisfy all parties.” He and Elder Queene looked at Elder Forsythe to explain.

“Each member of the pack council will be allowed to nominate any wolf they want to for the Alpha position.” His voice had a lilting edge to it, like the sound of a deep hum. “Those potential Alphas will challenge each other

one-on-one until there is only one wolf left standing. That wolf will have proven to be strong enough to be Alpha.”

“That sounds reasonable enough,” I said, though inside, my thoughts immediately went to Night and how I would again, despite my promise, have to watch him fight for his life in that arena. “When will this challenge take place?” I asked.

“In a month’s time.”

Violet grinned and patted the table. “Well, my goodness, I thought for sure it would take longer than that. You gentlemen work quickly.” She winked.

Her compliment did something funny to the Elders. A faint blush touched the cheeks of the oldest two, while the younger answered her praise with a surprisingly brazen grin. I wasn’t sure how it happened, but Violet had apparently won the hearts of these older gentlemen. This just solidified my decision to have her at my side when I dealt with the Elders.

As much as I wanted to savor the moment, I thought again about Night. I would nominate him, of course, but he could be killed during the challenge. It was true that he would be much stronger this time, but that meant that a lot of pressure would be on Night’s shoulders. If both packs were going to have peace, Night needed to win. The futures of both packs were resting on him alone, and that wasn’t fair to him.

I would of course do what I could for him because he was my mate and this was technically his birthright. But until that time came, I’d have to channel my energy into being the best Alpha the Kings had ever had, even if I would only be in this position for a month.

“I have something else I’d like to talk about,” I said. “I see that there are a lot of buildings that were destroyed during Troy’s rule. I’d like to get started on reconstructing them.”

“We have men working on that now,” Elder Queene said.

“And how are they doing? Do they need assistance?”

“That...I’m not sure about. They haven’t checked in with us since we gave them the project.”

“How long ago did you give them the project? The day after I won the challenge?”

He nodded.

“Who’s in charge of the reconstruction? I’d like to meet with him.”

Elder Queene paused and looked to the other Elders. None of them

seemed to have an answer.

“I’m sorry, Alpha Hunter,” said Elder Forsythe. “That, too, is something we just don’t know. We haven’t had to concern ourselves with construction projects before, so we’ve left that to the elites to figure out.”

“I see.” I glanced at Violet, who didn’t seem the least bit surprised to hear that the Elders had dropped the ball on this project. “Well, I’ll figure it out myself then. Could you give me one of their names?”

“Yes. You might want to speak with...Tyrell. He lives on the south side of the compound.”

According to Elder Forsythe’s directions, Tyrell’s cabin was just a quarter mile from the cabin where Violet and Tavi were staying.

“Do you want me to go with you?” Violet asked as we walked together out of the Elders’ cabin.

“No, but I really appreciate your offer,” I said. “I want to go with Night, but I know that he won’t be done with pack business until the night of the Alpha ceremony.”

Violet frowned. “Well, I don’t like the idea of you going by yourself. Maybe you could take your mother.”

I shook my head. “I think they might see me as weak if I go with Mom.”

“Maybe you could take one of the Wargs with you. I’m sure that Night left one or two here.”

“I don’t know...”

There was some strategy to my hesitance. Walking around with one of Night’s wolves could give the Kings the impression that I was afraid of them or that I needed a Wargs bodyguard with me wherever I went. Tyrell might even think I was trying to intimidate him if I showed up like that, and that was not the message I wanted to send. Then again, I could give the same impression if I brought Night with me. It was difficult to know what to do.

“Do you think Tavi would agree to go with me?” I asked.

“Tavi?” Violet considered. “I’m not sure. You’ll have to ask her, but I might be able to help convince her to head out with you.”

“Okay.” I didn’t know what I’d do if she said no. It suddenly seemed to me like it would be too late if I waited for Night to get back.

We reached Violet’s cabin soon after our conversation, and I went inside with her.

“Wait in the living room,” she said. “I’ll talk to Tavi.”

I nodded. While she went upstairs, I looked around the cabin. Because

this was just a generic cabin for a family to live in, the furniture and walls were standard, unpainted, unstained pinewood, and there were no decorations. Violet, I knew, preferred more colorful decor, so it was a bit surreal to stand in the home, knowing it didn't have her preferences or specifications. The only indication that she was living here at all was the lingering smell of chamomile and lavender tea.

I heard voices murmuring upstairs, followed by a closing door. Violet came down the steps, followed slowly by Tavi, who was dressed in an oversized sweatshirt and jeans.

"Violet said you need to speak to someone about construction," Tavi said to me.

"Um, yeah." It was hard to gauge how she felt about it. Her face was expressionless. "I didn't want to go by myself, and I know that you're pretty good with people. I want to make a good impression on this guy."

Tavi laughed, but it sounded a little forced. "I don't know about that, but I can try. Violet says you need the help."

"Oh. Okay. Well, if you're willing to come along—"

"I'm ready if you are." Her smile seemed a bit too bright, too cheery.

Before I could say anything more, Tavi started toward the door. I glanced at Violet, who gave me a sad half-smile. That, too, was hard to gauge.

I rushed to catch up with Tavi, who was already opening the door.

"You don't have to come with me if you don't want to," I said. "I know you're recovering."

"I know I don't." She was still speaking with that strange peppiness. "But I'm always willing to help, Bryn, you know that. It's what I'm here for."

I didn't really understand what she meant, but it bothered me. "Are you sure you're up for this?"

"Yeah, I'm sure! Don't worry, Bryn. I've got your back!"

"I know you do. I've got yours, too." I looked at her, and felt like there was distance between us where there wasn't before. Was she projecting this cheeriness because she felt forced to come with me? Was she hiding something from me? Or was this all part of her healing process somehow? I didn't think I would get a straight answer out of her, but there was no talking her out of coming with me.

TYRELL'S CABIN was similar to Violet's, but his door was painted beet red,

and the doorknob was brass instead of gunmetal gray. I heard voices on the other end, and they were all male. I cursed under my breath.

“I think he’s got other people with him,” I said. “I was hoping to catch him alone.”

She hesitated for about half a second, and then the peppy smile came back to her face. “Well, we’re already here, right?” she asked. “Let’s just do it now and get it over with.”

“Are you sure—”

“Yep! Violet said you were hoping to get this done today.”

I frowned, but she was right. I did want to handle this asap. I sighed and turned again to the door. I knocked a few times, and then waited.

I was nervous about speaking to these men, but unlike the Elders, where much of my nervousness came from uncertainty around my new role, my nervousness now came from a fear of being bullied. Tyrell and whoever was with him with might try to physically intimidate us. And if that happened, I didn’t know what we’d do.

Tyrell pulled open the door, still joking with someone behind him. “—didn’t know she’d hurt him like that.” When he turned to us, his smile faded, and surprise replaced it.

“Hi, Tyrell,” I said, hoping the expression on my face was neutral but not unfriendly but also not too casual. “I was hoping I could talk to you.”

“Oh. Um. Sure.” He blinked. “A-Alpha Hunter, right?”

“That’s right.” It still felt weird to hear.

“I have company over. Is that going to be a problem?”

I was glad to see that Tyrell didn’t seem to dislike me. Or, if he did, he hid it pretty well. He seemed nervous, too; I could see it in the slight twitch of his cheek before he spoke. He seemed almost as nervous as I felt.

“That’s fine,” I said. “I’ve brought someone along, too.” I gestured to Tavi. “This is Octavia.”

“Hello,” she said brightly.

He nodded to her, and then he led us inside. Unlike the Elders’ cabin or Violet and Tavi’s, Tyrell’s was very obviously lived in. There were clothes and dishes and candy wrappers in random corners of the cabin. It was messy and disorganized, but fortunately, it didn’t smell too bad.

Tyrell led us into his kitchen, where eight other men sat sipping beers. Their conversation stopped as they looked at Tavi and me.

Tyrell introduced each man, pointing to each one as he went around the

table. The men said nothing as he did, all of them just staring at us with intense, unwelcoming eyes. *At least Samson and Harlon aren't with them...*

"This is Octavia," I said when Tyrell had finished. "It's nice to meet you all."

Silence answered me.

Tavi broke it. "Hey, I know it's been a little while since you all have had an Alpha, but it's customary to greet her when she greets you." Her tone was still bright, but the sarcasm was obvious.

"I don't see an Alpha here," one of them, Seth, replied, leering at us. "Just a couple of bitches."

"A couple of female wolves in your presence, and that's the best you could come up with?" Tavi laughed, the sharp sound of it almost made me flinch. "Next you'll be calling us 'cunts' or something just as unoriginal."

He gripped his beer tight, and I knew he was wishing for her death with his eyes. I glanced at Tyrell, but he was watching me. I got the impression that he was waiting for something.

I cleared my throat, hoping to diffuse some of that tension. "I don't want to interrupt your evening, men, I just came here to talk about how the repairs are going around the compound. How is that going?"

No one responded, not even Tyrell. They did, however, have the presence of mind to avoid eye contact with me. I guess that was an answer in itself.

"Okay, so you haven't started. When were you planning on doing it?"

Again, there was silence.

"I'll answer for them," Tavi said suddenly. "They'd much rather leave their pack in shambles than try and rebuild anything. Picking up a hammer and doing something would just make it more real that they did nothing against Troy."

I glanced at her, finding a kind of manic edge to her smile and the twinkle in her eye. I got the impression that she was letting off some steam.

"Shut the fuck up," Seth said. "You don't know shit."

"You could try and make me," she said. "But you know it would start a war."

At that, the air in the room shifted from one of unfriendliness to one of trepidation and hostility.

"That's what I thought. You might not know this," she continued, "but Bryn and I have been through a lot thanks to the previous Alpha, a man who doesn't even deserve to be named. A man who attacked his own pack and

who actively tried to drag literally everyone down with him. But I guess logic doesn't count for much when we're standing in a room filled with men. If you sorry assholes can even be called that."

Seth's chair squeaked across the floor as he stood up, his eyes flashing. A few things happened all at once. Seth stalked toward Tavi, and I stepped in front of her at the same time that she took a step back. As he approached, Tyrell moved, too. He took Seth's shoulder and yanked him back to the table.

"Sit, jackass," he said, shoving him into the chair. "Or are you trying to prove her point?"

Seth looked like he wanted to argue, but with another glare from Tyrell, he stayed quiet.

"I'm sorry, I should have stepped in sooner," Tyrell told me.

"You should have," I agreed.

"I'm sorry," he said again.

"I don't want apologies, I want answers." I looked at the rest of the men, focusing especially on Seth. "Why are you all acting so coldly toward me? If you're ashamed to have a woman as your Alpha, it's only temporary. If you're unsure how to start rebuilding the pack lands, then I can get you resources to help you. But if you're still loyal to Troy after everything he did to the Kings, then you might as well find a new pack."

This third silence was different. The men still refused to meet my gaze, but there was color in some of their cheeks. It read to me like shame.

Tyrell looked at the men at the table and then back to me. "To be honest, we were going through hell with Troy as our Alpha. We had to stand by and watch while our *own* men were killed by Troy for any form of disobedience or opposition. The temper tantrums, the paranoia, the public executions..." He visibly shuddered. "Despite their behavior, there isn't a man in this room who supports the Redwolves. We're glad that they're gone."

"Then we have at least that much in common, right?" Tavi said gently. The faux joviality was gone from her voice. And when I looked at her, I found that the manic twinkle in her eye had also dissipated, but now her eyes were dark and haunted

"Right," Seth said. He didn't say anything more.

"Like I said, if you need help organizing, let me know. I know Wargs who are familiar with the rebuilding process. They will help if I ask them to."

"I don't think we need their help," another wolf, Buck, said, "We just haven't started up yet."

I shook my head. “Repairs should have already started, Buck. I’ll let them know you’re in the market for some assistance when they come back onto the compound. When they come by to help, you can take it or leave it.”

That seemed to be a good place to end our meeting. I nodded goodbye to Tyrell, and Tavi and I moved out of the cabin as quickly as we could without looking like we were running away.

When we were outside, I turned to Tavi, who seemed to be trembling slightly. All trace of her earlier, forced pep had totally vanished. The woman who walked at my side wasn’t the Tavi I had come to know at the Wargs’ compound, but this version was more genuine, and that was a relief.

“Tavi,” I began gently. “Do you...want to talk about what happened back there?”

“I wanted to try being myself again,” she said. “That person who’s ‘good with people.’” She repeated the phrase slowly, like the words didn’t quite make sense to her. “I don’t know if that’s still me.”

“You don’t have to prove who you are, Tavi. Not to me. You’re still my best friend,” I said. “No matter what.”

She looked at me for the first time since we left the cabin. Her expression wasn’t happy, exactly, but it wasn’t sad, either. What I read in her dark eyes was...appreciation, I thought.

“It’s nice to hear you to say that,” she said. “It really is.”

BRYN

There was only one day left before the Alpha ceremony. I headed out on my own to walk toward the dining hall. I could have found my way with my eyes closed, I'd frequented the dining hall so many times throughout my life. But this was the first time since being back that I had gone out on my own.

Violet and the Elders had come over again to talk a bit more about the finer details of the ceremony, but after only a couple of hours, that meeting broke. Violet hated leaving her adoptive daughter for long, and she wanted to head back to the cabin where she and Tavi were staying.

I debated whether or not I ought to go outside once I was alone in the cabin, but ultimately I decided it would be best for me to get out there and interact with my pack. I was a wolf now, and their Alpha, and like it or not, they couldn't mistreat me the way they used to. And if I was serious about being a good Alpha, I needed to do what I could to win them over.

I wasn't naïve—I knew they wouldn't immediately accept me with open arms. But I had to try if I wanted to earn even a shred of their respect. There was no way I would have anyone's respect if I hid inside all day and night. I also wanted the chance to look around and see what Troy's leadership had done to the land and its people.

Before I stepped foot outside the cabin, I spent an hour or so considering every negative possibility and what I could do in response. Only when I was satisfied that I had a plan for everything from a rotten tomato being thrown at me to a sudden attack of alien invaders, I ventured outside.

"Hey, just the wolf I wanted to see."

I almost jumped at the voice. I looked to my right and found Evan Brandy standing there.

“You wanted to speak to me?” I asked.

“Of course. You are the new Alpha, after all.”

Never in my life had I shared one conversation with him, so it was bizarre to have him seek me out. I’d known who he was, I’d seen him plenty of times around the compound, but he was older than me, and from what I could tell, he had preferred to stick close to Troy’s inner circle. As far as I could see, he wasn’t one of Troy’s closest friends by any means, but he was someone Troy had liked to keep around. When Night had told me that Evan was spying for him, that close but not too close relationship made a lot more sense.

“Were you going on a walk?” he asked. “Mind if I go with you?”

“Sure. I think I’d like the company.” We started moving.

Evan was a handsome guy despite the scar that bisected his cheek. His chocolate-brown hair shone coppery under the sun, and he wore a friendly, white smile.

It was a sunny, gorgeous day highlighted by a clear, azure sky. I walked through the compound, glancing here and there, observing various wolves as they spotted me. Most of their stares held cold hatred. None of these people said anything to me, but they didn’t need to. Their coldness did more than enough to make me feel unwanted and unwelcome. I had grown up alongside these wolves, but I needed to prove myself to them. Simply beating Troy in a fight wouldn’t make up for the years that they had known me as a punching bag at best, and prey at worst.

“I hope you don’t take this the wrong way,” Evan said, dragging me from my thoughts, “but I never expected the two of us would ever walk next to each other like this.”

“Yeah. We lived in very different circles up until Troy’s challenge ceremony. It’s...pretty strange the way things have happened.”

“But it’s wonderful, too, right? I mean, finding out you’re a wolf and that you have a mate so soon after meeting each other must have given you some pretty severe whiplash.”

I laughed. “That’s one way to put it. I still kind of feel like I’m living in a dream.”

“I can imagine.” He smiled. “I’m sorry that the others have been giving you such a hard time.”

I shrugged. I knew he was talking about the way the Kings were watching

us. “Honestly, I think it’d be weirder if they didn’t. At least I share a common enemy with them.”

“Ah. You mean Troy.”

I nodded. “Night told me while we were catching up that Troy went off the deep end while I was gone.” He had killed so many of his own people just to assert his power, and he’d damaged the community that had once existed between the Kings people. I continued, “I’m sure just about every person here hates Troy to his guts, but that doesn’t mean they’ll blindly trust me just because I defeated him.”

“That’s a pretty nuanced view of all this. I think if I were you, I’d just be angry.”

I glanced at him. His expression was still friendly, but I noticed something behind his eyes, a kind of sadness that spoke to my own.

“I am angry,” I replied gently. “But I don’t know how much I can blame them for what happened to me. If I were with the Wargs, I know I would have been accepted. Gregor and Troy were the reason everyone treated me so badly.”

“That doesn’t make what you had to deal with any less awful. I’m sorry I couldn’t have helped you.”

“Considering your position, I think it would have been a bad move.” I tried to smile, but it was hard to mean it. Having a friend back then would have made a huge difference for me as a child. But I wouldn’t tell him that. That was all in the past now. “What was it like?” I asked. “Being in your position, I mean.”

He chuckled and rubbed the back of his head. “It was really tough, honestly. I missed my friends back home. I didn’t hear from them as often as I would’ve liked.”

“You were just a teenager, weren’t you?”

He nodded. “The Wargs were the only family I had, but I had connections here. It wasn’t so bad.”

“I guess that’s something.” I smiled. “Well, thank you for what you’ve done and what you’ve sacrificed. I’m sure you know this, but it means a lot to both packs.”

He smiled. “I hope so. And thank you for keeping our Alpha in line. I’ve never seen him more open or more happy than when he’s with you.”

“It’s very sweet of you to say that.” We were nearing the dining hall, and I pointed to it. “I’m headed in there.”

“Ah, then I’ll leave you. I’m sure there’s someone who needs me elsewhere.”

Evan and I said our goodbyes and I headed to the dining hall. I knew the people inside would have questions about how a weak human had become a powerful wolf shifter. There would be skepticism and doubt.

I went into the dining room and almost bumped into a few pups as they ran by. I’d watched most of these kids at some point while their parents were busy, so I knew many of them by name. I bent to talk to them, but over their heads, I spotted three mothers coming closer. Two of them had their lips quirked in disgust while the third lagged behind uncertainly.

I straightened to meet them, and the chatter in the dining hall fell to a hush. I felt the eyes of every wolf in the building on me, and I knew that what happened next would set the tone for every future interaction I had with the pack.

“Claire, Val, Inez,” I said, addressing them by their first names. “How have you three been?”

Whatever Val and Inez had been expecting from me, those words weren’t it. Surprise replaced the disgust on their lips, but they didn’t speak to me. Instead, they snatched up the hands of their pups like I was something dangerous and hurried away from me.

I refused to take their reactions personally. Honestly, that had gone much better than I’d expected. Silence was always better than hurling insults my way.

I turned to Claire, who watched me with curiosity in her gaze. She held her pup’s hand, but she wasn’t turning her son away from me like I was a leper. Instead, she tried to smile.

“I’ve got to say, Bryn, I’m surprised as hell that you turned out to be a shifter.”

I laughed, not because what she said was particularly funny but because I needed to release some tension. “I doubt you were as surprised as me,” I said. “I thought my whole life up to the moment I shifted had been a mistake.”

Her smile became more genuine. “I bet.”

I took a seat at one of the dining tables, and Claire sat across from me. “Henry’s gotten so big since I last saw him,” I said.

“I know.” She rubbed his back. “He really hit a growth spurt, but he still clings to me like he did when he was a toddler.”

I giggled. “How are your other children?”

She and I fell into the rhythm of our gentle chat. Around us, conversation resumed, but I knew that everyone was scrutinizing every move we made.

“So, what was it like to discover that you were a wolf?” she asked.

“It was like magic,” I said. “Every fairy tale I’ve ever read suddenly made sense.” I beamed at her. “It was a miracle.”

Afterward, I got up to leave. I wasn’t really hungry, and I had plenty of food in the fridge if I changed my mind later on. For now, I was just happy with that interaction. As I headed toward the door, I noticed that there weren’t as many people glaring at me with disdain. Actually—and I hoped this wasn’t just my wishful thinking talking—their gazes seemed more curious and accepting.

It was such a small step in the grand scheme of things, but to me, it was a start, and that was all that mattered. I walked through the pack community and thought about how insane everything had become. So much had changed, but in many ways, things were still the same. Same paths, same buildings, same cabins—but I no longer felt like I had to scurry from place to place just to avoid detection from either Troy or the Terrible T’s.

As I moved deeper into the compound, I paid more attention to the land rather than just the buildings and the people of the pack. Grass that had once been beautiful, lush, and green was now dead. The foliage lining the compound had become unkempt and overgrown with sharp, pointy weeds. Branches that had fallen during storms and harsh wind still lay where they had fallen. Most had started to rot. I knew by sight that if I touched them, the wood would cave under my touch like an overripe mushroom.

The flowers were dead, and one or two of the cabins—the cabins that were closer to Mom’s in size—were starting to fall apart from unnatural damage.

Someone had purposefully destroyed those buildings, but Wargs hadn’t been the cause of it. That meant that Troy had allowed this destruction to occur under his watch and had done nothing about it. I frowned. This was a far cry from the beautiful home that I had been taken from five weeks ago. I’d need to put in some serious work to get this place back to its old state.

I knew my position as Alpha would only last a month, but I wanted to take it seriously. That was why I wanted to make sure the reconstruction projects went along smoothly. I had no clue how to be an Alpha, knew nothing about all the various tasks that being an Alpha entailed. Of course, I’d never gotten the chance to watch Gregor work or to even form an idea of

the daily activities of an Alpha. I was willing to learn because I wanted the pack to do well and because I fully intended to serve on the Kings' council after my term ended.

It felt like an overwhelming amount of work that I was about to tackle. I wondered if this was what Night had felt when he became the Alpha for the Wargs.

“Hey!”

I froze at the sound of the terribly familiar voice. I turned slowly, and the moment I laid eyes on Samson and Harlon, I nearly burst into tears. I immediately started to second-guess my decision to keep them in the pack. *Wouldn't it be better to just send them away? To never have to look at them again?*

“You don't fucking belong, bitch,” Harlon said, revealing a sharp-toothed grin.

“You're not fucking fit to be Alpha,” Samson spat. “It's a disgrace to the Kings to see any woman in the position, especially a former *human*.”

My hands trembled. I was back in the cave, back in the entry of Violet's apartment, back in my childhood when these two and Troy would torment me. I wanted to turn tail and get the fuck out of here, but I clenched my hands into fists to hide the way they shook. There was a crowd forming around us, and I couldn't back down. I needed to show that I could be strong even in the face of this heckling.

“Yeah,” Trish's voice cut through the brief silence. Whatever I'd been about to say died on my tongue as she, Tanya, and Tara stalked toward me. The Terrible T's in full force.

“You're a fake wolf!” Tara shouted. “You must have used black magic to make yourself shift. No human can be a wolf.”

The crowd had grown. It wasn't as big as the one in the dining hall, but I heard them begin to murmur to themselves that I must have used magic, that there was no way a creature as horrible as a human would be blessed with the ability to shift.

I clenched my hands even harder and straightened my spine. The only way to get them on my side was to be honest and open with them. I felt that this crowd would somehow know if I lied.

I cleared my throat and began to speak. “I didn't become a shifter, I was one the entire time. It wasn't until I found my mate that I found my wolf.” I explained a bit more about the story, about how suddenly the shift had

happened, how I felt like I'd known my wolf my entire life even though I'd only recently found out about her. Looking out over the crowd, I saw that while some of them believed me, many were still skeptical.

"That is the biggest load of bullshit I've ever heard," Trish snarled. "True love brought your wolf back? I don't think so."

"We're not just going to let you put a spell on our pack, bitch!" Tara called.

I let out a sigh. I didn't expect anyone to believe me, I knew it was a crazy story, but it was *my* story. There was no way to convey the truth in a way that would prove I wasn't lying to them.

"Whatever you believe about me," I said, speaking up so that crowd could hear me, "I know I'll need to work my ass off to earn your trust, but I'm more than willing to do it."

"You'll crash and burn," Samson told me. "You're the last person in the pack who should be Alpha."

His words stung, but I tried to force them off me. I couldn't appear weak to the pack. "You're entitled to your opinion," I told him, "but I believe that we can move past our differences and forge a path forward, for ourselves and for the pack."

Neither Harlon, Samson, nor the Terrible T's seemed to have a response to that, so I went on.

"Troy Redwolf is no longer a threat to you all; I'm making sure that you won't ever need to fear him or me killing someone you love just because they looked at him the wrong way. I believe that with a bit of effort, we can restore the land to its natural beauty." And, because I was feeling a bit cheeky, I told them, "I'm not going anywhere anytime soon, so you might as well start accepting that."

That was it. That was enough. They could accept that or leave it, I no longer cared. I walked away, eager to get out of the limelight, but as I forced myself to pass Harlon and Samson, I heard in a whisper, "*You better watch your back, and enjoy the position for as long as you still have it. Because your time in this pack won't last much longer.*"

I wished later that I had glared at them or that I had slapped them in response, but their threatening tone took me back again to those dark moments of my childhood. All I could do was pick up my pace.

NIGHT

I arrived back on the Kings compound the night before the Alpha ceremony. I had been planning to return tomorrow, but I couldn't stay away from Bryn for even one more day. I burst into the cabin, eager to find her, and followed her scent to the kitchen where she was washing dishes. She wore one of my old shirts and nothing else. Just the way I liked.

"Night," she said as I pulled her away from the sink and into my arms. My name was the only word she could get out before I covered her mouth with mine. I pressed her back to the counter beside the sink, and she pushed her wet, sudsy hands up my shirt, running them over my chest. I didn't care about getting a little wet as long as I could return the favor.

She reached down between us to stroke the growing tent in my jeans, and I growled low into her mouth. Bryn knew exactly what to do to drive me insane. She surprised me, suddenly turning and pushing me into the counter. She lowered herself in front of me, grinning as her eyes glowed like sapphires. She freed my cock with just a few deft movements of her fingers, and took me firmly in her hands.

I groaned as she stroked my length with both hands, those damned gorgeous eyes watching every twinge of pleasure that passed over my face. In another second, I was in her mouth. I groaned as her tongue circled the tip of my cock a second, third, fourth time, before she took me into her mouth.

I ran my tongue over my lips and leaned back to look at the ceiling. One of my hands gripped the edge of the counter, the other went to her thick hair. I pulled her messy bun free and ran my fingers through the silken locks. She released my dick with a little *pop*, and then ran her tongue slowly back and

forth over it.

“Damn...Bryn,” I whispered. “Damn...”

She lapped up each bead of precum. When she got down to my balls, sucking them into her mouth, I was so surprised that the granite cracked beneath my hand. The sudden sound of it caused her to pull back, and we both looked at the countertop like a pair of pups who would be punished for the damage.

But then it hit us that this was now Bryn’s home, and we began to laugh.

“Too much?” she asked.

“Maybe,” I said, helping her up, “but I hope you don’t think that was the end of it.”

Amusement and lust darkened her eyes. “I hoped it wouldn’t be.”

I lifted her up so she was sitting on the counter. She pulled off her shirt and tossed it over my shoulder. Then she wrapped her arms around my neck and pulled me in close, bringing me flush with her erect nipples. Our kisses were ravenous, and she spread her legs so I could fit between them. I slid my dick back and forth over her clit, which confirmed what I already knew—while she had been giving me the head of my life, she had been touching herself, too.

Such a good girl.

Sliding into Bryn was like finding my way home. She was so familiar, so soft, so perfect. I had no idea how I’d survived even a day without her. My hands gripped her hips, pulling her closer and pushing me in deeper. She wrapped her legs around my waist as I slipped my mouth down her jaw to her throat, where I nibbled at her mark.

“Night, I love you,” she panted as I thrust into her.

“I love you, too.” I let my fingers rub her clit. She must have been so, so close to her orgasm when I broke the granite countertop because it didn’t take much stroking to make her back arch into me. I watched the pleasure send her eyes rolling into the back of her head, and committed the memory of her mouth in that perfect “O” to memory.

As she came back to me, she gazed at me through hooded, teary eyes. “Don’t ever leave me again,” she said.

“If I can help it,” I said, thrusting into her, chasing my own orgasm now, “I’ll never leave you alone again.”

WITH SATISFACTION still thrumming through our bodies, Bryn and I sat next to each other at the dining table, each of us holding a can of beer. We started catching each other up on the things we'd missed.

"Our mothers finally met." She beamed at me. "They're so similar. I think they'll be fast friends."

"I'm not surprised, but I'm glad they're getting along. From what you've told me about Glenda, she sounds like someone who would be good company for my mom."

"I hope so!" Her smile dimmed a little. "But speaking of friends, I'm worried about Tavi. I heard from Dr. Stan that she was healing physically, but mentally and emotionally, things aren't the same."

"How has she been acting?"

"She's distant, and she gets lost in thought so easily. There's this haunted look in her eyes that wasn't there before, and she isn't really present during the time we spend together."

That sounded nothing like the girl I'd grown up with, the girl I'd been lucky to call my sister. Concern wound between my ribs and constricted around my heart.

"I'm worried, too, but she behaved in a similar way after she lost her family. I think the only thing we can do for her is give her time. We don't know everything that happened to her when the two of you were separated, and until she's ready, all we can do is be there for her."

Bryn gave a deep sigh. "I know you're right, but I wish I could do something to help her feel better." She downed a few gulps of her beer, and quickly jerked the can away, her features contorting adorably. "What the hell? Is this pond water?"

I snorted. "Too strong for you, princess?"

She made a face at me and slipped off her chair to grab a different drink. "This could be used to sanitize wounds."

I chuckled.

"How was your meeting with the pack?" she asked. She'd brought back a glass of wine.

"It went pretty well." I finished the rest of her beer before cracking open mine. "They more or less accepted the new status quo, and they were excited to hear that you and Tavi are safe."

She smiled. "I miss them. I hope I can get to see them again soon."

"Me too." I touched her hand. "They were especially excited to hear

about our binding ceremony. A lot of them want to come.”

Her answering grin was so large, I had to kiss her just to taste her happiness. The number of people who wanted to attend ended up being well over half of the pack. I was just happy that so many of them seemed willing to cross enemy lines just to see Bryn and me. Now, how many of those hopefuls would actually attend the ceremony, I wasn't sure. It would surely end up being a smaller number as nerves grew and the joy of the announcement faded to the background. Whatever the numbers turned out to be, I just hoped Bryn was happy.

“Have you had the chance to talk to your Elders about the Alpha thing?”

She nodded. “Apparently, each member of the council will nominate a candidate, and those candidates will have to fight in the arena until one is left standing. The ceremony will take place in a month's time.”

“And I imagine that you'll be one of those who can nominate a fighter?” I asked. “Because if not, I guess we'll have to find someone to bribe.”

She giggled. “Yes, I'm on the council, too. Actually, even after I relinquish the Alpha title, I'll be able to serve on the council as Den Mother.”

“No kidding?” My chest swelled with pride. I'd worried that the Kings' Elders wouldn't respect Bryn's win over Troy, but it seemed they were doing their utmost to do right by her.

“I'm sure it won't surprise you to know that I'm nominating you, Night,” she said. “But I want to make sure that you know that I'm not choosing you just because you're my mate; it's because I know you're the best wolf for the job.”

I kissed the side of her head. “I understand, Bryn.”

“Well, good.” I enjoyed the sight of her cheeks taking on that soft pink color when she was embarrassed. “I don't know who else will be nominated, but I don't think there's anyone else who is as determined to end the rivalry between the packs.”

“I agree.” I would do everything I could to make sure I won the challenge, but it wouldn't be easy. There were other wolves who were more experienced than the ones I'd fought when I was younger, but I wasn't afraid of the challenge. In fact, my wolf began to pace back and forth at the thought of getting a chance to fight again.

Speaking of challenges...I took a long sip of my beer before turning my body to Bryn. “We need to talk about something else.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Troy.”

She frowned, her head cocking slightly to the side. “Why? He’s in the cells; there’s no way he’s going to see the light of day again.”

I took her hand between mine. “I know that you were hurt and feeling a lot of different emotions at the time of the challenge ceremony, but you weren’t thinking clearly when you made the decision to lock him up. Now, time has passed, and you need to put in the order to have Troy killed.”

She pulled her hand away, bristling. “I was thinking perfectly clearly at the time. And I’m thinking clearly now. I won’t have Troy killed just because I’m afraid of him.”

Shit. Have I already fucked this up? “Bryn, Troy can still be a threat to the pack if he’s left alive. He can send messages through the pack that would turn your people against you. Or, more personally, he could become the reason that you have to look over your shoulder for the rest of your life. Killing him will send everyone a message that you won’t tolerate any disrespect or anyone planning to stage a coup.”

She pushed away from the table, her chair squeaking over the floor. That was how I knew that I’d fucked this up even worse.

When she turned toward me again, her eyes blazed like blue fire. “Or doing something like that will sour what little good will I’ve fostered in the last few days. I’m not going to be a fucking dictator, Night. I won’t kill everyone who scares me or makes me uncomfortable. I’ve never been a killer, and I refuse to be now. I can’t do this like you would.”

Hurt pumped with anger through my veins as I pushed away from the table and got to my feet. “Is that what you see me as, Bryn? A mindless, killing tyrant like Troy?”

“Of course not! I never said that about you, Night.”

“How the hell else am I supposed to take what you said?”

“I meant—” She cut herself off mid-tirade to close her eyes and take a few deep breaths. When she looked at me again, she was calmer, but still quite serious. “I meant that I wouldn’t run the Kings the same way you would. Troy is in jail for now, and if he becomes a problem, I can deal with that then. Killing him now would do nothing but make people believe that I’m doing it for petty reasons, and I’m on thin enough ice as it is.”

I was still pissed off, but I was starting to understand what she was saying. She agreed that killing Troy would send a message, but that message would interfere with the kind of Alpha she was trying to be. I got that, but

sometimes an Alpha had to make tough decisions, even if that meant putting people on his (or her) bad side.

“I think,” she continued, “that killing should be the *last* option, not the only option.”

I shook my head. “The world doesn’t work that way, Bryn. Hesitating to kill could cost you your own life. Sometimes, if you want to protect your pack, you have to decide to kill someone instead of leaving them alive, because letting them live can do more damage in the long run.”

She sighed, crossing her arms over her chest. “That’s your opinion, Night, but I’m the Alpha for now, and I’m not going to start my short reign as a killer.”

“Most every Alpha starts out as a killer, Bryn,” I countered. “The only way to become Alpha is through violence.” I let my eyes slip away from her and lowered my gaze to the ground. “I would know. I had to kill from the time I was sixteen.”

“That was different.”

I sat back in my chair. “I don’t see how.”

“Because, Night, you grew up in that world. It was the only option you were given, and that was a disservice to you. You forget, Night, that I grew up living in a pack without getting to be a part of that pack. It left me isolated and prevented me from forming any relationships I could’ve built, but it also sheltered me from those violent rituals. You grew up having to fight and dealing with a shit Alpha who ran the pack into the ground. I understand why you killed him, and I could never hold that against you.”

It still felt like she was just paying lip service to me, and I couldn’t look at her. I heard her step toward me, and saw her hands enter my field of vision as she touched my wrists.

“Hey, Night,” she touched her lips to my forehead, “you are *nothing* like Troy, and I’m so sorry that I made you think that you were. Even when you kidnapped me, I knew you were different, brave, strong.” She kissed me again. “I’m not saying there’s anything wrong with the way you lead your pack, but I can’t be that kind of Alpha, even if it’s what you and others expect from me. If I want to do right by the Kings, I have to do right by me, too. Taking a life, even one as vile as Troy’s, goes against what I believe. And I don’t know if I could live with myself afterward.”

I looked up just as she was leaning forward. Instead of kissing my forehead, this time she kissed my nose, which was a pleasant surprise, even

though we were still on opposite sides of this issue.

“What if you had killed him in the arena?” I asked. “Could you have lived with yourself then?”

She frowned as she considered my question. “Maybe. All I can say for sure is that I was raised to grow and cultivate life. That’s the type of Alpha I want to be.”

I sighed. I still didn’t like the fact that Bryn was going to leave Redwolf alive. But after talking with her, I understood that she was too good a soul to order the death of someone else. I realized that it was cruel of me to try and put her in that position, especially when it would hurt her so deeply. For now, I would just need to deal. Troy’s death, I knew, would come soon, and it would come swiftly. Until then, all I could do was keep a very close eye on those who were loyal to him.

I took Bryn’s hands and pulled her close. How could I think that someone with skin as smooth and soft as hers would be willing to end the life of another? “I’m sorry for trying to push you to do something you weren’t comfortable with.”

She gave me a small, warm smile. “It’s okay, I know you’re trying to protect me, and I love you for that.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to keep Troy’s men in cells of their own?”

Was it just me, or did she hesitate a beat too long after that question?

“Bryn?”

“Sorry. Yes, I’m sure. I think doing that would set a bad precedent. Unless they do something that’s actually illegal, I don’t see a reason to keep them locked up.”

“Fair enough, love.” I kissed her gently, but I didn’t agree. It felt like a bad idea, but I knew we’d go around in circles about it. “So, what do you need me to do while I’m here?” I asked. “What would be most helpful to you?”

Her eyes lit up. They were the bright, sunny blue of a summer’s day. “My current strategy is to gain the respect of the female wolves and to help get the pack lands back into good standing. I want to try and help them unlearn a lot of the sexist bullshit that the Redwolfs indoctrinated them into, and I think having high-ranking female members of the Wargs pack around will help me do that.”

“Makes sense.” I nodded. “And me?”

“Remember those destroyed cabins we saw the day after you claimed me?”

I let the men heading the reconstruction projects know that you're available to help them rebuild. I don't know how receptive they'll be to it, but I let them know help was available. What do you think?"

"Divide and conquer." I rubbed my chin. It was a sound plan. A very sound plan. "It's solid. I think we'll have a good shot at making this happen."

She grinned and pressed closer to me. "I'm glad you think so, too."

BRYN

Tavi and I had given each other plenty of space while I became more accustomed to the role I'd been given. As the days passed, I tried stopping by to see Tavi more than once, but she always said she wasn't ready for a visit. I had something important to talk to her about, but she would just shake her head and give me that sad, distant smile that had replaced her usual beaming grin.

I tried speaking to Violet about Tavi the night before the Alpha ceremony, but she didn't know much more than me.

"I can't say, girlie," she said with a sad shake of her head. The moment I mentioned Tavi's name, her shoulders slumped, and she let out a long sigh laden with worry. "You would know more about what happened in those caves than any of us would."

Violet couldn't have meant it, but those words cut me deep. I didn't know any of the specifics of what Tavi had been through; all I knew was that the experience had changed her. But I still loved her. She had been my first friend at the Wargs compound, and she had quickly become precious to me. It hurt to see her suffering like this and be unable to help her.

I couldn't stand being apart from my best friend anymore.

"I know she keeps refusing to see you, Bryn," Violet said. Her hands pulled apart her braid with deft, quick movements. Her long hair, crimped from the braid, fell over her shoulders like a silvery waterfall, covering the awful mark that Troy had left on her shoulder. "But don't give up. She wants to see you, too, but she doesn't think she's ready."

"She told you that?" I asked.

“Not in so many words.” Violet gave me a small smile. “Call it a mother’s intuition for her daughter. And anyway, you can’t keep letting her avoid you. You have something important to ask her, don’t you?”

My eyes widened, but I shouldn’t have been surprised. Violet was so in tune with things, I should have known that she would have an idea of what I wanted to talk with Tavi about. *Part* of what I wanted to talk to her about, anyway.

“Yeah, I do.” I nodded. “Do you think she’ll talk if I’m straightforward with her?”

“I do. She misses you, too, remember.”

Again, I nodded. I headed back to the Alpha cabin and had some fun with Night, but even after we had exhausted each other with sweet ecstasy, I couldn’t sleep. My mind was too clouded with thoughts about not only the Alpha ceremony, but Tavi as well. I tried over and over to plan what I wanted to say to her, but nothing felt quite right.

I woke after a fitful hour, maybe two hours of sleep, and slipped out of bed. It was the day of the Alpha ceremony, and for once, I was up before Night. After I got ready, I wrote him a note telling him that I needed to prepare for the ceremony. Even in sleep, his hands reached for me as I pressed a kiss to his forehead.

I suppressed a giggle, avoided his hands, and quickly slipped out of the room. It was still dark out; the sun wasn’t set to rise for a while yet. Well, it would have been dark for me if I were still human. With my shifter eyes, I could see everything clearly, though in a slightly monochrome hue.

I headed to Tavi and Violet’s cabin and knocked on the door. It opened a few seconds later. Violet never seemed to sleep, so I expected her to be the one to answer, but Tavi was the one who stood on the other side. All of my plans for what I had wanted to say, thoroughly considered over the course of a restless night, vanished from my mind as I met her deep, mahogany-brown eyes.

Tavi seemed just as surprised to see me. For a second, her eyes widened and her fingers twitched, as if she wanted to raise her hand. But the surprise quickly faded, and that empty, blank smile returned to her face.

“Oh, Bryn. It’s a little early for you, isn’t it?”

“Oh, yeah.” My laugh sounded forced, and decidedly un-Alpha of me.

If Tavi noticed, she didn’t show it. She held onto the knob, her body facing me, but made no move to let me in. In sweatpants and an oversized

long-sleeved shirt, she looked like she'd slept for days but still hadn't rested. "So, did you need something?"

"Um, yes, actually. Tavi, I—" I hesitated. "I need to talk to you."

There was a flash of another expression across her face, but this one I recognized immediately despite the fact that it had rarely marred her features when she spoke to me. Annoyance.

Again, it vanished quickly. "I'm sure, but isn't today the day of the Alpha ceremony, Bryn?" She stepped back into the cabin, trying to give me the hint to leave. "Violet let me know you've got a full schedule. I'm sure you have other things to do than waste your time with me. We'll talk sometime soon, okay?"

I needed to remember to be direct. "It's never a waste of time to talk to you," I said. "You're my best friend."

Tavi hesitated, wavering from side to side like a ghost. I thought she might be about to refuse me again—and if she did, what could I possibly do?—but then she eased her hand from the door.

"Okay." She shifted her eyes down and away from my face.

"Okay." I let out a breath. "Do you...want to take a walk?"

"Um, sure. But, just, not around the compound."

She had seemed more willing to walk around when we spoke to Tyrell, but she'd become more reclusive since then. *Is she not adjusting well to Kings' territory? Is her recovery not going well for her?* Neither of those possibilities would bode well for what I wanted to ask her, but maybe talking with her would allow me to help ease her worries?

"Of course. We can go wherever."

I didn't mind where we walked. The Elders weren't expecting me to stop by until after sunrise, so we had time. Besides, I knew exactly where to take her.

Tavi called to Violet to let her know that we were going out, and we set off. She was quiet as we walked through the compound toward the forest, keeping her eyes either straight ahead on the tree line or on the ground. It reminded me of the way I'd moved from place to place when I had been human.

I tried to think of what Tavi would say to me if our roles were reversed, but nothing I could come up with sounded genuine or helpful. I wanted so badly to be the comfort that she had been to me when I was still Night's captive, but surprise, surprise, the former human couldn't think up a way to

do it.

My wolf whined and nudged me with her nose. *Don't*, she seemed to say.

I closed my eyes long enough to take a deep breath, and when I opened them, I felt less sorry for myself. My wolf was right—I shouldn't be putting myself down when I was trying to make my friend feel better. This wasn't about me; it was about Octavia Black, who needed someone to be there for her. So, though we walked in silence, I tried not to feel bad about it. I couldn't try to be Tavi to make Tavi feel better. I could only be myself.

When we reached the tree line, she uncurled a bit, her shoulders rolling back to a straighter posture, her chin raising slightly higher. We walked a bit further in until we reached a small clearing. Tall, thin spruce surrounded us, and white and purple wildflowers decorated the forest floor.

“Is this a good place to stop and talk?” I asked.

She nodded. “It's beautiful.”

“I think so, too.” I sat in the middle of the clearing and crossed my legs. “My mom used to take me to this spot when I was a kid. She would tell me that this was her ‘thinking spot’ when she was a younger wolf. She said that she'd lay out in the grass and stare up at the sky through the canopy until life started to make sense again.” I patted the spot next to me. “Wanna try it? I promise the grass is super soft.”

She hesitated, but eventually nodded. “Okay.” She sat down and together we lay back in the grass. The soft blades cradled us as we looked up toward the sky. It had started to lighten from black to a royal blue, a gradient that steadily lightened as it reached the horizon.

Lying like this took me back to those moments with Mom, when we would eat sweet homemade granola and she would tell me stories about shifters she knew.

“Is this okay?” I asked. “If it's too quiet or something, we can keep walking.”

“No, no. I...I like this a lot actually.”

I couldn't see her face, but something about her tone seemed a bit more relaxed. My chest warmed. I was doing something right!

“To be honest,” she said gently, “I'm surprised you'd want to talk to me after the way I acted when we went to talk to Tyrell.”

“Hm? But I thought we agreed that went okay all things considered.”

“Well, I thought so, too, but you never came by again after that. You never asked me to help you with any other Alpha projects around the

compound.”

I started to respond, and then I stopped. I replayed that sentence in my head, and realized—she thought *I* was avoiding *her*?

I sat up on my elbow and looked down at her. “Wait, Tavi, I think you’ve been misunderstanding me. I was trying to give you space. I felt like I used Violet to make you help me out that day, and I didn’t want to push you into doing something you didn’t want to do again.”

She frowned, glancing away from me. “But it makes sense, doesn’t it? I was useless when we were held captive, and I only made things worse between you and the Kings.”

“That’s not true! Neither of us could do anything against Troy, and we were both hurt and scared and weak...and Tavi, I was so glad that I took you with me that day. I mean it.”

She didn’t say anything, but when she wouldn’t look at me, I knew that she wasn’t convinced. So I tried again.

“I would have loved to have you around with me these past couple of days. I’ve felt out of my depth and confused so many times, it would have been great to have you there with me...”

Guilt panged through my chest as my sentence trailed off. I’d spent so long thinking about how I was going to get Tavi to stand by my side, but none of that mattered if I’d messed this up before I even knocked on her door. How could I ask her to be my beta when I was so blind to what she wanted? I wasn’t there for her when she needed me because I was off doing my own thing, and I didn’t even consider that she might have wanted me to visit her.

“Tavi,” I said, “I should have done a better job at reaching out to you. I hate that I’ve made you feel like I didn’t value you. I feel terrible about this.”

She was quiet for a few seconds, and then she said quietly, “Well...it’s not like I did a great job saying what I wanted.” She started to tug at and tear up the grass between us. “I guess I shouldn’t have expected you to know that I wanted to see you or that I missed you. You couldn’t have known.”

The guilt began to ease from my chest. That response made me feel better about asking her to be my beta.

“We can both be sorry about our miscommunication,” I said, “or we can promise to do a better job of it in the future.” Communication was going to be key to what I wanted to ask her. “How about I stop by more often and you can let me know if it’s a good time for you?”

“I’d like that,” she nodded. “But I...I could make more of an effort to see you, too.”

“I don’t want you to push yourself too much, Tavi. Was the reason you didn’t want to walk through the compound because you didn’t want to see Tyrell or the other men?”

“That was...one of the reasons. I’m okay with walking around with other people, but I hate doing it by myself.”

“I don’t blame you—I feel that way, too. What was the other reason?”

She went quiet, and this time, I got the sense that she really didn’t want to talk about her reasoning any further. I wouldn’t push her about it.

“Well, whatever your reasons, I’m glad you’re willing to spend time with me a bit more,” I said. “That makes me really, really happy.”

“I’m glad you still want to spend time with me, too.” It almost sounded like there was a smile in her voice, but I didn’t look to confirm. “So, um, what did you want to talk about?” she asked.

“I...wanted to let you know before I announce it later tonight,” I said. “I want you to be my beta.”

She gasped and sat up. She looked down at me, grass still clinging to her hair. “Me?”

“Yes, you.” I grinned. It was obvious how badly she wanted it. “You’re my best friend, Tavi, so of course you’re the only person I could even consider for the job.”

“But—” Her face fell, and she looked away. “I can’t do it.”

I sat up on my elbows. “Why not?”

“Because I’m not...” she trembled as she searched for the right word, “*good* anymore. I can’t do any of the things a beta does—”

“That’s not true!” Interrupting her wasn’t part of the plan, but Tavi was saying things about herself that I couldn’t let slide. “What does a beta do? They watch over and counsel the Alpha, they protect the Alpha and the pack, and they can step in if ever the Alpha isn’t capable of serving. They have to be someone the Alpha can trust implicitly. We just talked about how much I appreciated you when we talked to Tyrell.”

She looked away, so I went on.

“Tavi, remember that you sought *me* out when I was staying at Violet’s cabin. You protected me and watched over me when I was getting to know the other Wargs. You always made time for me, even though we hadn’t known each other very long. When we were captured by Troy, you were the

strong one, you—”

“Stop!” Her voice became a sharp growl as her teeth sharpened to wolf points. “I said *I can’t do it!*”

I flinched despite myself.

As the echo of her words launched birds into flight, she put her hands to her face, her shoulders shaking.

I reached for her, but the moment my hand touched her shoulder, she flinched away. “Tavi—”

“See, Bryn?” she said. “I can’t even have a conversation like a normal person. How the fuck could I protect you from anything when you had to step in when I pissed off that asshole at Tyrell’s cabin?” She shook her head. “How could I give you any advice when I snap at you like that?” Tears poured down her reddened cheeks, and her eyes glowed as she looked at me beseechingly. “I’m no good anymore.”

“Tavi, you are!”

But she shook her head and got to her feet. “Frankie would be a better choice. She’s strong and capable. Or, hell, even your mother would be a good option. Who would stop you?”

I hopped to my feet as Tavi turned her back to me. My instincts were telling me that at any moment, she would bolt for the trees. There was no telling whether she would head back to the Kings’ compound or to the Wargs’ compound or if she would just go into the forest and I would never see her again. I couldn’t let that happen.

When her muscles tensed to run, I jumped on her back, wrapping my legs and arms around her and holding fast. She stumbled under my weight, but she was stronger and larger than me so she quickly regained her balance.

“Get *off!*” She clawed at my arm. It hurt, but the scratches weren’t deep; they’d heal without a scar before I met with the Elders.

She tried to buck me off, but I held fast. If she really wanted to, she could throw me to the trees or claw through skin and muscle down to my arms, but she didn’t do either of those things. Instead, she yelled and scratched and jerked around, but because she didn’t want to really injure me; that was as far as her attempts went.

After a little while of this, the fight left her. She stumbled until her shoulder hit one of the trees, and her body shook. “Bryn, please...” she said through a warbling voice. “Please.”

I slowly let her go. When my feet hit the ground, I took a step back, tears

filling my own eyes. “I—I’m sorry, Tavi. I shouldn’t have grabbed you like that, but I couldn’t think of anything—”

Tavi turned to me and wrapped her arms around my neck. She held me tightly and buried her face in my shoulder. She let out these long, heartbreaking sobs, her tears soaking into the shoulder of my shirt. I held her back just as fiercely, gripping handfuls of her shirt, letting her cry as long and as hard as she wanted.

When her body-quaking sobs finally subsided, she stepped back, wiping her face with her sleeves. The left side of my shirt was damp with tears, but that didn’t matter to me. All I cared about was making sure that she was okay.

“Screw whatever I thought before,” I said, rage quickly replacing my sorrow. “If those assholes are still fucking with you, I’ll send all of the men who helped Troy down in the cells with him. I don’t care what the pack has to say or who it is—”

“No!” She shook her head, spraying tears. “Don’t do that.”

“Why not?” I demanded.

“Because you’ll hurt your image!” she cried. “You’re already on thin enough ice as it is, and...and anyway, it won’t make me feel better, Bryn. If you do that, whatever you hoped to accomplish at the meeting with the council will fail, and...and these Kings will hate you even more, and I-I won’t have that o-on my conscience!”

It’s worth all of that if I can make your hurt go away! But I bit back what I wanted to tell her. I wasn’t thinking; it wasn’t my place to make her feel any responsibility or guilt or whatever. I couldn’t put that on her shoulders.

“Tavi,” I began, my voice a bit raspy, “what did they do to you?”

She shook her head, still wiping tears. “I’m not—not ready to s-say,” she said through hiccups. “It was *awful*, but I just *can’t*.”

I nodded. “I won’t ask you anything more about it. I want to be here for you, I want to lend an ear when you need it, but I will never, ever make you talk about whatever it was.” I clenched my hands when they trembled. “I’m sorry I said all that stuff about imprisoning those men. I just—”

“No, no, it’s okay.” She lowered her sleeves and looked at me. “It makes me a little happy to know that you would risk so much just for me.”

She gave a smile, and even though her eyes were still filled with tears, a tiny bit of the light had returned to her eyes. She wasn’t the old Tavi, and maybe whatever happened to her would prevent her from turning back into

the endlessly cheerful woman I had always known her to be. But I still loved her dearly, and any sign of improvement, any sign that she was clawing her way back to some kind of “normal” or at least “stable” was more than enough for me.

“Is that weird to say?” she asked when I didn’t respond.

“N-no, not at all!” I rushed to assure her. “It’s just nice to see you smile.”

She let out a brief laugh. “Thanks, Bryn.”

“Anytime, Tavi.” I reached for her hand, and she let me take it. I squeezed it gently. “I hope this doesn’t come off as insensitive, but I’m even more sure now that I want you as my beta.”

She frowned. “What? Why?”

“Because even when you were dealing with the worst of your emotions and you were trying to get me to let you go, you didn’t hurt me. And even a minute ago, when you were crying and I was saying all that dumb stuff, you didn’t want me to imprison Troy’s closest people. You were thinking of what was best for me even when you were hurting.” I squeezed her hand again. “Can’t you see? You are the best choice for my beta, Tavi. I trust you more than I trust myself.”

She bit her lip. With her cheeks still red from crying and her face totally free of makeup, the vulnerability in her face as she looked at me made me want to start crying all over again.

“Even now?” she asked.

“Yes. Even now.”

“Are you sure?”

“Tavi, I am *positive*.” I beamed at her, willing her to see just how deeply I meant that. I knew she wanted the position as much as I knew that Night loved me, but self-doubt was holding her back from saying yes.

She deliberated for a few moments more, and then she nodded. “It’s only for a few weeks, right?”

“Right!”

“Okay, then...okay. I can do it. But at the first sign that I’m shirking my duties, I want you to replace me or get Frankie or Violet or—”

“Tavi, okay, okay.” I laughed. “Even if that does happen, we’ll have a backup plan in place. I won’t make you do anything you can’t do.”

“Right.” She nodded and seemed to steel herself. “Thank you for talking to me, Bryn. You’re my best friend, too, and...and I trust you.”

Those words swirled around and around in my heart, warming me from

the inside out. I pulled her in for another, gentler hug, and she hugged me back. For just those moments, I could forget that I was about to become the temporary Alpha of the Kings. As far as I was concerned, it was just me and my dearest friend, and the rest of the world could wait a while for us to finish our hug.

NIGHT

Finally, it was the day of the Alpha ceremony, and I was a bundle of nerves. Bryn left a note that she would be busy, and not being able to see her when I woke up only worsened my worry. I hadn't been anywhere near this antsy when I was named Alpha of the Wargs, but because it was my mate's turn this time, I couldn't get out of my own head. The only thing I could do to distract myself was take a walk and see how the repairs were going.

My wolves had arrived that morning. There had been a few light skirmishes that were easily squashed before they became all-out brawls, but other than that, they were settling in smoothly.

The extent of the destruction that Troy had allowed on his own grounds evoked memories of the raid that he and his goons had headed on the Wargs' compound. Buildings were burned, earth was scorched, and I'm sure there were more than a few injured occupying beds in the infirmary. The difference between the Kings' lands now compared to what they'd looked like when I first infiltrated the compound over a month ago was stark.

I'd always believed that the persistent beauty of the Kings lands was one of the few constants in life, but now all I saw as I looked around were patches of dry, dead grass, shriveled flowers, and torched buildings. The forest surrounding the grounds was unkempt and riddled with weeds. It was physically painful to see how far the grounds had fallen in just the few weeks since Troy had taken over for his father.

I observed the people, too, some of whom were limping or sporting casts from whatever torture they'd endured at Troy's (or his men's) hands, and

others who seemed eager to scurry away from the attention of their peers.

I had spent so much time telling myself that the reason I wanted the Kings pack was because it was my birthright, but as I took in the current state of things, shame once again burned through my gut. Now, I wanted nothing more than to be the Alpha of both packs so I could make sure these innocent wolves had the chance to live a good life.

I walked a bit farther, following the path that Bryn had showed me earlier, and found a group of six Kings men beginning reconstruction on a cabin. Each of them had planks of wood, nails, and other tools to get it done. Sitting to the side were four other Kings who were chatting with each other while the rest worked. I assumed those not working were on break until one of those who were sitting threw an empty can of beer at a man sawing a plank of wood.

“Cut straighter!” he shouted. “Or is that the best you can do? Maybe your mate would be better suited to this kind of work?”

The man said nothing. He just rubbed the spot on his head where he’d been hit and resumed sawing, this time attempting a straighter cut.

Ah. Now I understood. Those who sat around were higher-ranking members of the Kings. Given the fact that they were bigger than those working, they were likely among Troy’s elites. They were probably there with the responsibility of “supervising” the progress, but really, they were just hanging out and heckling those who were actually working.

My upper lip twitched, and I reached out for Dom.

“Hey,” I sent, “*you busy?*”

He replied immediately. “*No. Why? What do you need?*”

He’d apologized for what he’d said to me back on our own compound, and we hadn’t had another fight like that one. But he still wasn’t back to his usual self and he hadn’t told me what was bothering him. I wondered if it might have something to do with Tavi, but I didn’t think it was time yet for me to try to broach the subject.

“I want you and the others to meet me on the north side of the Kings’ compound where the worst of Troy’s destruction is. We’re going to do some reconstruction.”

“Roger that.”

While Dom gathered the team, I approached the group of workers. They hadn’t seen me from where I stood, at their backs, so all ten men looked up in surprise as I neared.

“Need some assistance?” I asked those who were working.

“What the hell is this?” one of the elites asked. “Night Shepherd offering to help rebuild a cabin? I don’t believe it.”

I glanced at him where he sat in a lawn chair, made a point of assessing him, and then deliberately turned my back to him. *You’re not a threat to me. Fuck off.* That was the message I was sending.

“Well?” I asked the working men. “Seems like you could use a few extra hands.”

The man who had been hit with the beer can looked from me to the elites and back again. “W-we wouldn’t mind the help—”

“Don’t talk to him!” I heard the creak of a wooden lawn chair followed by footsteps headed toward my back. “We don’t need or want your help, Shepherd.”

“You wouldn’t,” I said, looking at him over my shoulder. “But about half of you aren’t helping. You must be too busy to offer your own assistance.”

His lips pulled away from his teeth. “I don’t need this from you. Some man you are, letting your woman fight your battles for you.”

I turned to face him, meeting his gaze head-on. I noticed the other three men who were sitting and drinking were focused on the two of us. Their eyes ping-ponged between us as we spoke.

“Is that the hill you want to die on?” I asked him. “When you know the circumstances of the challenge your shitty Alpha made to me?”

“D-doesn’t change the fact that you lost that fight,” he shot back.

I narrowed my eyes. I could give him credit for stepping up to an Alpha and challenging me like this, but I knew that most of his bravado came from a desire to look tough in front of the others.

“Maybe you doubt that I can defend myself,” I replied. “Maybe you’d like to see what an Alpha can do at his full strength.”

He inched a step back, but tried to play it off. “You...you’re not worth the effort. Do what you want, Shepherd, see if I care.” He returned to his lawn chair but kept his gaze on me. That was enough of a victory for me. He knew which of us would win.

I crouched next to the man with the saw. “What’s your name?” I asked.

“Steven,” he replied.

“Nice to meet you, Steven. I’ve got some men coming this way. Where can we help the most?”

“I think we mainly need guidance,” he said. “We were apprentices to our

pack's carpenters, but many of them were ki—" He cut himself off, glancing at the group of elites and then back to me. "We lost them before they could finish teaching us, so we feel a little out of our depth here."

I couldn't believe how badly Troy had fucked his own pack. Then again, he was so unstable, so hell-bent on ruling through fear, I shouldn't have been surprised.

"I can help with that. Where are the plans for the cabin?"

"Aiden's got it."

Aiden, like Steven, was wiry and compact. His body was built for construction work like this. He showed me the diagram for the cabin, but the specs were only half-finished.

"The acting Alpha let us know that we needed to take the construction more seriously. Unfortunately, we didn't get a chance to complete this," he said, shame causing his cheeks to burn red. He glanced at the wolves who were sitting as he said, "We were told we needed to start working now."

"I know about the construction project, but only an idiot would force you all to start work when the blueprint isn't finished." I knew those "idiots" could hear me. They'd stopped drinking and were focused on us entirely. "Let's finish this first. Is this cabin for a family or maybe storage?"

While Aiden explained the cabin's purpose—it was indeed for a family—I took over the planning. Just as I finished explaining to the group of six which aspects of their blueprint were solid and which needed to be reworked, my team arrived.

I explained the situation to them, and they immediately set about helping the six men with their respective tasks. Every single one of them had helped build a cabin or two, and they were each knowledgeable about the process. The four men who were drinking and doing nothing eventually got up and walked away.

We didn't need them. With the extra hands, we were able to get the skeleton of the cabin built. Steven, Aiden, and the other men had already buried the support posts in the earth at the proper distance from one another.

I noticed that a group of six had approached us—a mother, father, and their four children. The youngest pup was only a few months old and was still cradled in the arms of the mother. Now that Steven, Aiden, and the other four had a much better idea of what they were doing, I decided it was alright to walk up to them.

The father stepped forward in front of his family. It didn't offend me that

he wanted to protect them from me. Given the fact that there were rumors about the Wargs being borderline feral, and that this man's most recent encounter with an Alpha had been with the murderous, insane Troy, it made sense that he would be cautious around me as Alpha of the Wargs.

This was an opportunity to show the Kings that their misconceptions about us were just that—misconceptions. Rumors. So, to show that I respected his caution, I stopped a few paces away. I only needed to be close enough for him to hear me without shouting.

“Are you the family who will live in this cabin?” I asked.

“That’s right,” he said. His shoulders relaxed somewhat, but he kept his family behind him. “We came by earlier to see the progress, but they weren’t this far along with the work.”

I nodded.

“Am I to thank you for their quick progress?” he asked.

“I wouldn’t say that. Steven and the others are doing the bulk of the work. My team just got them on the right track.”

His eyebrows raised. “I wouldn’t have expected an Alpha to be humble.”

I hadn’t been expecting the man to say that. It made me chuckle. “I’m not being humble. I’m being honest.” I glanced back at the group of Kings and Wargs. One of them had said something funny enough to make the group chuckle. It made me think that maybe there was something more here. At least now maybe some of the Kings could imagine a future where they and the Wargs could live together properly.

“It’s them who deserve your thanks,” I said, returning my attention to the family.

“Well, I still feel thanks is due to you.” He glanced at the working men and back to me. “To everyone.”

“I appreciate it just the same.” The second youngest peered up at me from around her mother’s skirt. “Did Troy give you a reason for destroying your cabin?”

“No. He was after our neighbors for reasons he refused to tell us.” The man frowned, remembering. “The fire spread from their home to ours when the wind turned, and we had to grab what valuables we could to get out of there.”

“I’m sorry.” It angered me that Troy would be so careless. Especially when there was a family with young ones just next door. “I’m glad that we can get you into your new home quickly.”

“Me too.” He smiled. “Like I said, thank you.”

As I returned to the group, Dom walked up to me. I greeted him with a nod.

“What did they want?” he asked, glancing at the family.

“They were checking in on the progress,” I said. “They’re the family that’s moving in.”

“I see. This was a good start,” he said, crossing his arms, “but we’ll need to do more if we want to endear ourselves to the pack.”

I nodded. “I know. But there are going to be a lot of opportunities for that. More construction projects, for one.”

He gave a dramatic sigh at the thought of more manual labor. “On a brighter note, did you get a chance to talk to Bryn about the Alpha situation?”

I nodded. I explained the process of selecting the next Alpha to him and that Bryn would still serve on the Kings’ council as Den Mother. I left out the fight we’d had and my worry about Bryn, because if I was right that Dom was concerned about Tavi, I didn’t want to bring up my love life.

“Bryn is obviously going to nominate me, and a month from now, I’ll have to fight to show that I’m worthy of it.”

“That’s more straightforward than I was expecting,” he said. “I guess it’s a good thing we’re already getting a head start on improving relations between the packs.”

I nodded. That sharpness was one of the many reasons I had wanted Dom to be my beta. “Bryn is trying to win over the women, and I’m trying to focus on these sorts of projects.”

“It feels good to make some progress, huh? Almost feels like victory is closer than it’s ever been.”

“It does, doesn’t it?” I felt good about the progress we’d made today, and I was glad that I’d managed to distract myself from my worries about Bryn and the Alpha ceremony. But something still felt off to me.

Dom sensed my tension. “What’s up, Night?”

“I don’t know. Just a feeling.” I tried to shake it off. It was possible that what I was feeling was leftover jitters for the Alpha ceremony on Bryn’s behalf. Or, it could have been the fact that I’d lived through too many disappointments and false starts as an Alpha and as a member of the Wargs pack to trust when things were going too smoothly.

“The sooner we get this Alpha ceremony over with, the better,” I said. “Then Bryn will be confirmed and we’ll be able to have our binding

ceremony.”

“Agreed,” he replied. “And we’ll have the official backing from the Kings’ Alpha for these repairs.”

That was true, too. In truth, I knew my worries were probably for nothing, and I knew that as long as I was there, nothing would go wrong. But I wanted to see Bryn again. When I thought of her, my wolf got excited and anxious. He wanted to protect her from...well, everything. Being away from her on such an important day was more than enough stress for us, and the sooner I could set eyes on her, the better.

BRYN

Mom, Violet, and I had completed most of the preparations for the Alpha ceremony by the time noon rolled around, so I had some time to mentally prepare for my meeting with the council and Elders. The Kings' council was made up of the highest-ranking families of the pack, which meant that all of them had a vested interest in staying on top of the food chain. I knew already that none of them would care very much about what a former human had to say about the pack that they had spent a significant portion of their lives forming. Still, the meeting was necessary because I would soon be their Alpha.

At the meeting, Night and I were going to broach the subject of having the Wargs take control of the reconstruction and land redevelopment projects going on around the compound. I knew it wouldn't go over well, but it was something that the Kings needed. They were so unprepared for tackling such a huge project, and they would benefit from the Wargs' knowledge and experience. It would also be a great opportunity for us to gauge the temperature of the room on the subject of the packs merging down the line.

Tavi offered to be there, too, knowing that she would soon be my beta, but our talk had clearly taken a lot out of her. I told her to spend the day resting so she could be prepared for the official announcement by tonight. She, however, protested that idea.

"I should be there, even if I say nothing," she said. "I want to show everyone in the room that I've got your back."

And so, we would present a united front—Tavi, Night, Violet, and myself. The usual meeting building had been destroyed in one of Troy's

tirades, so I decided to hold the meeting in the Alpha's cabin because it was the only private location on the Kings' compound that had plenty of room for everyone.

Tavi helped me set up the meeting room before everyone arrived. It was about the size of a large bedroom, with a long oval-shaped mahogany table standing on top of a red Persian rug. The square window opened to the forest, and we drew the curtains shut.

Night arrived shortly after we finished prepping. He seemed surprised to see his sister there.

"Tavi," he said.

"Hi, Night." She smiled a little.

He looked at her with a concerned frown. "We haven't had the chance to talk," he said. "Are you sure that you're okay being here for this?"

It was a big question, but he couldn't know how big. She wasn't just attending this meeting for her health; she was also acting unofficially as my beta. I watched her to gauge her reaction, and was relieved to see that her nod seemed confident.

"I'm more than sure," she said. "Listen, it's almost time for the meeting to start, and I want to make sure those council people don't have to wait."

She left Night and I alone, and when he looked at me, I tried to smile. "It's a lot for her to take on, I know, but she seems excited about it."

He drew closer to me and pulled me against his chest. "I'll have to trust that she knows what she's doing."

I leaned into him, drawing strength from his closeness. His presence immediately set the worst of my nerves at ease. I wanted him with me to show a united front to the attendants and to rely on his experience as an Alpha to back up the points I wanted to make. He stood beside me and immediately slipped his hand into mine. He smelled like sweat and sunshine, two scents that stirred desire in my core even though I was nervous about the meeting. He, no doubt sensing my feelings, glanced at me out of the corner of his eye and smirked.

I would have smacked his arm, but people started funneling in. Quietly, the Elders and council members of the Kings and the Wargs filed in and took their seats. Night and I stood at the front of the dining hall, and every gaze turned toward us. My pulse spiked and I squeezed his hand. He leaned down to whisper in my ear.

"Be strong, love," he told me. "You don't have to have all of the answers

to their questions; you just need to be as confident as you can about what you do know.”

I nodded.

“Don’t forget, the council is here to help advise the Alpha in matters of the pack. Be respectful, but don’t let them steamroll you.”

Again, I nodded. I expected them to try and take advantage of the fact that I was just a temporary Alpha, but Night was right—I couldn’t let them do it. Up until this meeting, I had tried my hardest to stay under their radar because most of my bullies were within these elite families. I recognized each face. Even still, if I gave them an inch, they would know how to manipulate me, and I didn’t want to make this process any more miserable than it needed to be.

Their names were Colby, Ross, Dana, Edward, and Grant, and after the Alpha, beta, and the Elders, they had the most power and sway in the pack.

I took a deep breath and put on a smile. “Thank you, everyone, for being here,” I said. “It means the world to me that you’re all willing to listen to what I have to say.”

The Kings gave nods. It wasn’t a verbal response, but any acknowledgement was better than none.

I let go of Night’s hand and stepped forward, letting the large bell sleeves of my dress fall over my fingers. Not wanting to waste time, I got right into the matter at hand. “I have been thinking about this since the day after I won the challenge ceremony. Troy Redwolf destroyed so many important buildings and homes around the compound, but progress on reconstruction has been not only slow but inefficient. I learned that many who had knowledge of carpentry and land development were killed or horribly injured during Troy’s reign. And it is for that reason that I propose that the Wargs should head the reconstruction effort.”

The moment the words left my mouth, there was an uproar. The Kings threw question after question and comment after comment my way. It was noisy, and a bit chaotic, and it made me want to get the hell out of the building that somehow felt much smaller than it did when the meeting began.

After a few moments of letting them speak, I raised one of my hands the way I’d seen Night do during arguments between Wargs. To my surprise, the gesture actually worked; the council fell quiet and their full attention was on me.

“I know this comes as a surprise to you,” I said, “and that this isn’t the

first solution you would have chosen. But we can all see how slowly progress is going.”

“I find it hard to believe that the Wargs will want to help us,” Ross said. His salt-and-pepper hair fell down his back and his long bangs covered the scar on the side of his face.

“Yes,” Edward agreed. His bald head shone in the light of the room. “Having more Wargs on our soil will lead to infighting, and whatever progress you claim will happen will be overshadowed by those fights.”

“I can’t say that there won’t be some fighting,” I said, “but I will tell you that many of the Wargs have already volunteered to share their expertise. Troy carelessly sabotaged his own pack’s workforce, and those who remain need leadership and training if we want to repair the Kings’ lands quickly.”

Night cleared his throat before chiming in. “I would just like to reiterate that we Wargs are more than open to assisting in this process.”

“Why?” Colby asked. His gray moustache completely covered his upper lip. “We have been enemies for hundreds of years. What benefit do you have in this?”

“The bad blood between us goes back far longer than living memory,” Night said, “but us Wargs are tired of the conflicts—from petty skirmishes to cruelly targeted destruction—that our ‘war’ has become. The Redwolfs were the biggest supporters and perpetrators of those conflicts. Now that they’re no longer in power, we’re eager to get off on the right foot.”

Tavi, who sat on the other side of me, tapped my foot. I glanced at her and saw her eyes dart to Grant. He had a weathered face, tanned from hours spent in the sun, and the frown on his mouth told me that he was deep in thought. He had always struck me as a particularly gruff and unfriendly man when I’d seen him walking around the compound in my youth. He had always seemed so old, but had insisted on patrolling the grounds anyway up until a few years ago when an old hip injury prevented him from walking.

I gathered some courage and addressed Grant directly. “Grant,” I said, “you seem like you might have something to say?”

“Yes,” he said slowly. “To be honest, this idea has some appeal. It’s true that Troy’s paranoia led him to kill many of our best people. I’m not happy about inviting our enemy onto our territory, but it would give us immediate access to wolves with knowledge and experience in areas where we are lacking. Perhaps we could use each other.”

I didn’t like the term “use” in this context, but it was an unexpected vote

in our favor. I started to reply, but a voice cut over me.

“I don’t mean to outright disagree with you, Grant,” said Dana, the only female member of the council, “but I, for one, am not at all keen on the idea of giving access of my land to *those* wolves.”

Dana had always been close to the Redwolves, and she was the one I’d expected to be the most resistant to the idea. She let her dark gaze drift lazily from me, to Night, to the other Wargs gathered in the room, making sure that we all knew the jab was intentional and that she didn’t care.

“We have lived in this territory for centuries, and the only time the Wargs have stepped foot on our soil it has been at risk of death to our own. How do we know you all aren’t just taking advantage of our time of need? Perhaps you’re using this as an opportunity to worm your way past our defenses.”

“We aren’t interested in kicking you when you’re down,” Night said. “If we wanted to do that, it would be done.”

“So you claim. But perhaps your forces aren’t strong enough to take down our forces, even in our weakened state.”

I glanced at Night, but he wasn’t letting the hostility in her comment get to him, so I took his cue and kept my face blank, too.

“I assure you,” he said, “that is not something you need to worry about.”

She looked like she had more to say, but I figured now was a good time to intervene. “We aren’t interested in starting an endless back and forth,” I said. “Our goal for this meeting was to bring the idea to everyone, to get you thinking about it and more comfortable with it. Night and I are aware that what we’re proposing won’t be easy to swallow, or free from hiccups. I am aware that I will only be an interim Alpha, but I didn’t want to exert my authority over the Kings without giving you the opportunity to work with me. This could be the start to a good working relationship between the packs, one that puts future generations at less risk.”

With that, I ended the meeting. The Kings exited quickly, and the Wargs more slowly. Violet winked at me on her way out. She and the other Wargs present had not spoken up, but they hadn’t needed to. Having them there along with the Kings showed that there was a desire to foster goodwill between the packs, and I felt confident that their presence had helped.

When everyone funneled out and Night and I were the only ones remaining, I let out a long breath.

“That could have gone better,” I said, running my hands through my hair.

“You think so? I thought it could’ve gone way worse.” He sat on the table

and gestured for me to come closer. “I can handle older women making snide comments like that as long as the other Kings were listening.”

I moved into the circle of his arms, and he kissed my cheek. “I guess you’re right,” I said.

He kissed my other cheek. “You did a great job back there, especially with that last speech. You should be happy with the progress we’ve made today. Every step we take toward bettering relations between the packs is a worthwhile one. It’s like...” He racked his brain for an analogy. “It’s like when you get a seed to sprout. You plant it in the ground and do what you can to water it and care for it, but you can’t force it to grow. We just have to wait and see and hope for the best.”

I smiled. I didn’t know Night was partial to gardening metaphors. “I know we’ve got a long road ahead of us, but I was hoping there would be more of a desire on the Kings’ side to end the war. Even if they weren’t excited about merging, I thought they would be happy to hear that we wanted to put an end to the bloodshed.”

“There are a lot of old feelings mixed into this, Bryn,” he reminded me. “And there will be opposition to our packs growing closer, not just because war is all they’ve known, but also because there are some who benefitted from the conflicts between our packs.”

I nuzzled into his neck and kissed him there, tasting the salt on his skin. “That’s true, but I feel like there has to be something more that I can do to encourage them to see our side of things. Grant seemed a little open to the idea. I just wish I knew how to get everyone else on board.”

“Sometimes you can’t win over everyone. Sometimes the best way to convince them that it’s a good idea is to show them.” He lowered his head and brushed our noses together. “I believe in you,” he said, kissing me firmly.

BRYN

Night left to catch up with Dom, which meant I had plenty of time to walk around the grounds and decompress after the meeting. The bright, sunny day had become a bit overcast as I walked along the perimeter of the village toward the trees.

I still felt a bit uneasy about not having a plan of action to make the joint reconstruction effort more appealing. I had tried to put on a brave face for Night, but I felt like I was having an out-of-body experience. That had been the first time I'd ever spoken to a member of the council before.

It was bizarre to suddenly be able to speak to them on their level. I mean, presumably. On paper, I was an equal, but to them, I was just a cockroach who'd escaped from under their heel onto their ceiling. I'd done my best in there, but there was a sense of lingering doubt in my chest. If I didn't do something now, our unification plans would fall to shit.

I thought about speaking to my mom or Violet about this, but Mom had returned to working in the gardens and I didn't want to interrupt her. As for Violet, I'd spotted her chatting with Dr. Stan, and the energy of their conversation had seemed very intimate. When she laughed and placed her hand on his shoulder, I knew I didn't want to insert myself into whatever they were talking about.

Unfortunately, the only thing I could think to do that might settle my nerves was to try talking to someone in the elite, to learn how I could get them to listen to me. I didn't want to speak to a pack member or their children; I had essentially zero allies here, so I couldn't trust them to lead me down the right path. I racked my brain for a person I could speak to, and the

name came to me with resounding clarity.

Troy.

I went to the Alpha cabin to change into a gray cloak. I didn't want anyone to spot me while I was on the way to his cell.

The holding facility was located near the northwest side of the compound, and there were plenty of less-traveled paths to get there. Just as before, I kept my head down and tried to blend in. If people weren't looking for me, they didn't see me, so I had no trouble sneaking by the dining hall, the food storage building, and the schoolhouse to get to Troy's cell.

I pulled open the heavy door and closed it behind me. In front of me, stairs led down into a concrete bunker. The holding facility for criminals wasn't a place I'd ever been to before. I'd had no reason to do it, and as far as I knew, Gregor had rarely visited. His prisoners were held there to rot. As soon as I had the chance, I'd review the prison records to see how many of them actually deserved to be in these cells. Knowing the Redwolfs, it was likely that most of them didn't.

I headed to the back of the facility, past prisoners who reached for me and begged for help, toward the isolation unit. Troy was the only one in these cells aside from the two guards who kept watch over him. I'd specified that I wanted Troy kept away from the other inmates so he couldn't try and win favor with them, and I'd insisted that his guards were men who had no connection with the Redwolf family.

My decision, though the best I could do with current resources, was a temporary one. Most shifters—wolves in particular—can't stand isolation. Shifters thrived in community, and without it, their mental health suffered. Keeping Troy away from others would only exacerbate his insanity. I'd need to think of a long-term solution for him, but for now, this was all I could do.

I temporarily dismissed the guards outside his cell. They left me to speak to Troy, and I peered through the window. His cell was made of thick steel, and there was only a small window in the door that allowed him to see out and me to see inside. Not even the strongest shifter could break through steel, so no one was getting in or out of there without a damn good excuse. I peered into the room and saw Troy's cot and his toilet. He wasn't allowed much else without supervision.

At first, I couldn't see him, and my heart began to tremble, thinking that he had somehow escaped. But soon, his face appeared in the window from the left. He banged on the door at the same time, attempting to rattle me, but I

didn't flinch. He hit the door again and gave a yell of frustration. His glare would have skewered me where I stood if he had the ability to do that.

His hair wasn't in its trademark bun. Without it, the auburn strands fell in unkempt waves around his face and his shoulders. He wore neon orange sweatpants and a t-shirt of the same color—the uniform that all prisoners had to wear in case they somehow escaped. The bright color would make it much easier to find them.

Around his neck was a thick metal collar. It would electrocute him if he tried to shift. Seeing it reminded me of the collar and chain Tavi had been made to wear when she and I were his captives. The idea of anyone having to wear such an old-fashioned, cruel device made my skin crawl, but we couldn't risk Troy shifting. That, too, would need to be fixed as soon as possible. I'd need to ask Violet or the Elders if there was a more ethical way of suppressing his shifting ability.

I didn't say anything to him at first, and he began to sway from foot to foot, his gaze fixed on me like a cobra about to strike. The irony of all this made the situation even more complicated. This time, I was the one who was free, staring in at Troy as my prisoner. I wasn't the one hoisted up on his wall in my underwear or chained to the wall of a cave for his use.

I couldn't keep myself from asking, "How does it feel to be the one in captivity, Troy?"

He snarled at me and banged on the two-inch thick glass that kept him and me separated. Again, I didn't flinch. Didn't blink.

"What the fuck do you want?" he roared.

"You're not in any position to demand anything from me. You're lucky I gave you this mercy when you never granted it to the innocent wolves you've killed."

"You're an idiot if you think locking me up was a mercy. At least I had the decency to kill my enemies and not let them lose their minds in some cell."

I wasn't moved. "I won't feel sorry for you. You had this coming, and you know it. Or did you really expect your own pack not to turn against you when you started neglecting their needs and killing them?"

"I was thinning out the weak!" he growled. "That's what an Alpha is supposed to do, but a worthless whore like you would never understand that."

"You're the one who wasted all that time and effort on someone you view as a 'worthless whore.'" I tilted my head, a questioning pout on my mouth.

“What does that make you, Troy?”

“Fuck you!” His eyes started to burn, and then his body jolted as an electric shock coursed through his body. I wanted to look away, but I forced myself to watch the pain contort his features and stiffen his muscles. This was the reality, and looking away would only show him that I was soft.

I wasn't an idiot. I knew Troy would never willingly give me any helpful information. He would do it accidentally if I got him pissed enough, and there was no way to do that other than to bring up Night and his birthright. In the same way Troy had tried to break me in the cave, I'd need to play off his insecurities to get what I needed.

“This was a mercy,” I said once he calmed down, “compared to what Night wants to do with you. Don't forget, Troy, that I'll still be on the pack council even after the permanent Alpha is chosen. Night will take his rightful place as Alpha for both the Kings and the Wargs. Someday, we'll even be able to merge the two packs.”

He spat out a laugh, still panting and sweating from the shock. “You're delusional. The council will never fucking allow it.”

“Don't be so sure.” I crossed my arms, putting on that questioning pout again. “I just came from a meeting with them and the elite families of both packs. Both sides are sick of burying their loved ones and would like to finally have some peace. They're both interested in the idea of having more land and resources.”

“You lying bitch!”

I smirked. “You really underestimate the allure and appeal of Night Shepherd. After all, why wouldn't they be pleased to have the pack's rightful heir as their Alpha?”

His fists were red and bruising the more he banged on the glass and metal. “You're not worth the cunt you warm his bed with!” he raged. “I am the rightful heir to this pack. Night is nothing but a bastard child. He meant nothing to my father.”

“But wasn't it you who said that Gregor confessed the truth to you? Wasn't he planning to announce that Night would take his place once he died? It sounds to me like Gregor was proud of the man Night had become and knew he would make the superior Alpha.”

Troy growled at me. “Gregor was a weak, sentimental fool on his deathbed. He was out of his goddamn mind. But that doesn't matter. The stupid council doesn't matter, either. The elite would never allow Night to

take over because *my* family kept them in fucking line.” He smirked back at me. “There’s nothing you or Night can do about that.”

“We’ll see about that.” I showed my teeth when I smirked. “Thanks, Troy, for being so helpful.”

His eyes widened, and I turned from him to head back out of the cells.

“Enjoy the rest of your life, Redwolf!” I called.

His yelling followed me as I gave the guards the clear to resume their duties outside his cell. It was cut off by another shock. He didn’t frighten me anymore. Why would he, when he no longer had any power over me or anyone else?

I pushed the door closed and took a deep breath of fresh air. Troy had given me exactly what I needed. I knew now that I needed to prove to the elite families that Night was nothing like Gregor or Troy, that he wasn’t the feral beast that the Wargs had been made out to be. Troy was right that winning over the council meant nothing if their families and the rest of the elite weren’t on board. We could pivot our plans to focus mostly on them.

I stretched my arms over my head, feeling so much lighter now that I had some kind of plan for our next steps. I glanced the sky and found the sun beginning its descent toward the horizon. I headed back toward my cabin and enjoyed the breeze. My life was so different now from how it’d been just a couple of months ago. The girl who had grown up reading fantasy novels and longing for a place to call home now had the chance for not only a home but a large, loving family. I was so grateful to have the opportunity to do all this.

“Bryn!” Tavi was calling for me.

I turned, and gasped out loud. She wasn’t alone—Pax was with her! He let go of her hand and ran to me. I crouched, and he ran into my arms.

“Bryn, I missed you so much,” he said, sobbing into my shoulder.

“Oh, Pax, Pax, Pax,” I said, hugging him tight. “I missed you, too, brave little boy.”

His tears soaked into my shoulder as I held him as tightly. Tears stung my eyes thinking of how close he’d come to death, but my joy and relief at seeing him safe and sound allowed me to be strong enough to hold them back.

“His mom said that they were going to attend your binding ceremony, but he wanted to see you today. He was determined to make me take you to him,” Tavi said. “I couldn’t say no to him.”

I stood with Pax in my arms and looked up at her. After our talk, she had

seemed in better spirits. But of course, the darkness lingered in her gaze. There was a smile on her face, but it seemed exhausted. My joy at seeing her and Pax was tempered by my concern for her.

“I’m glad you did,” I said, “but are you sure you’re okay?” I hadn’t forgotten that she’d told me that going around the compound alone made her uncomfortable. I imagine it was worse with a little boy in tow.

But she nodded. “More or less. There are a lot of people going back and forth, which is both really nice and a little overwhelming.”

“Ah.” I took in her hair and her clothes. “You look great, by the way, Tavi.”

Her raven-black hair was braided down her back, and the long-sleeved, smoke-gray sheath dress she wore went down to her ankles. My chest warmed knowing that the ceremony meant so much to her that she would dress up for it.

“Thanks.” Her smile was still more a reflex than a genuine expression of joy, but I wouldn’t let myself mourn that. I knew from experience that it was a huge undertaking to get dressed or shower when depression hit its hardest. I was so proud of her for doing this.

“You have to get ready, too, Bryn,” Pax said suddenly. He pulled back and wiped his eyes with his fists. “The Alpha ceremony is gonna start any minute!”

I laughed. “Well, we still have some time to get ready, but you’re right, I should get my butt in gear.”

I spotted Dom heading toward us over Tavi’s shoulder. I raised my free hand to wave at him. Tavi turned to see who was coming, and stiffened.

I glanced at her and saw a flash of something like shame cross her gaze as she looked down and away from Dom. Quickly, she schooled her features to form her usual, impersonal mask. I looked at Dom, and saw that he had also seen her face fall. Concern was clear as day on his face; he wasn’t even trying to hide it. I knew that he wanted to reach out to her, to make her okay again, but she wasn’t even close to being there yet.

Before Dom could open his mouth, Tavi turned to me. “S-sorry, Pax, we should let Bryn get ready for the ceremony. I’m sure your mom is missing you.”

“Okaaay.” His voice was full of disappointment. Of course, he had no idea of the interpersonal drama that was happening between the adults around him.

He let Tavi pull him into her arms, and she quickly turned away from us. “I’ll see you at the ceremony, Bryn. Dom,” she said.

“Tavi, wait just a sec—” Dom stepped toward her, but when she began to speed-walk away, he stopped himself from following her. Seeing him long for her, watching him clench and unclench his hands, the veins standing out from the muscles in his arms, I knew it must have taken everything in him to let her walk away.

It pulled at my heart to see him like that.

After another beat, he tucked away the torrent of emotion I’d just seen and turned a small smile to me. “You headed my way?” he asked, offering his elbow to me. “I’ve got a certain Alpha to escort around the compound.”

The gesture was so gallant, it made me laugh despite myself. I really, really liked Dom, which was part of the reason this thing between him and Tavi hurt so much to watch. He was like the brother I never had and never knew I wanted.

I took his arm with a slight curtsy. “Please, good sir, lead the way.”

He chuckled and we walked together to the Alpha cabin. We were silent for half of the walk, both of us in our own heads.

“So, Tavi,” he began, at the same time that I said, “I’m kinda worried about—”

We stopped, and then our surprise became understanding, saddened smiles. “I guess we were thinking the same thing,” he said.

I nodded. “I’m worried about her, too.”

He gave a deep sigh. “I’ve been trying to give her some space, but I don’t know if it’s helping or just making her feel more alone.”

I nodded again. “I know what you mean.”

He glanced at me. “Do you...do you know what happened to her?”

“No. And even if I did, I couldn’t tell you what it was, Dom. Not without her permission.”

“Right. Of course. I’m sorry.”

I patted his arm. “Don’t be. You shouldn’t feel bad about being concerned.”

“I just want her to know that I want to be there for her. That I want to help her in any way that I can. But I just don’t know what I can do for her.”

“I’m so sorry, Dom. But I think the only thing you or anyone else can do is wait for her to reach out. She’s too fragile right now.”

He looked over my head, back in the direction Tavi had gone. “I know,”

he murmured, “but I miss her.”

His words grabbed hold of my heart and squeezed. He’d said so much in just those few words, and it made me want to burst into tears. If he really cared about Tavi, I could imagine the anguish and yearning he felt for her now. How could I not when I had a mate of my own?

We arrived at the cabin, and I let go of Dom’s arm. I looked up at him and found him staring in the direction of Tavi’s cabin again. His honey-blond hair fell over his eyes as a breeze blew by. He didn’t even move to push it out of his handsome face.

“Dom.”

My voice pulled his attention.

“I know you’re hurting, but I wanted to tell you something I should’ve told you a while ago.” I wasn’t used to being open with a man other than my mate, but it felt okay with Dom. “Thank you so much for saving my life, and for being there for me from day one. You were the first one to make me feel normal, even before Tavi, and I appreciate it more than you know.” I smiled. “To me, you’re more than just a friend; you’re my brother.”

His eyes widened, and then the grin he gave me was just like the ones I’d become familiar with at the Wargs compound. “I’ve always liked your spunk and tenacity, Bryn,” he said. “I knew the second Night saw you that he was done for, no matter how hard he tried to hide it from the two of us.” He and I laughed, and he pulled me in for a hug. “Thanks, little sis,” he said, kissing the top of my head. “Alpha looks good on you.”

NIGHT

I stepped out of the shower just as I heard the front door close. After a pause, my wolf began to pant. Bryn was back. I waited for her to enter the bedroom, and when she did, her eyes widened.

“Wow,” she said with a slight groan. “You need to put all this away. I don’t have time for that body right now.”

I laughed and walked over to her. Pulling her in for a kiss, I caught a whiff of my beta on her. I growled before I could stop myself.

She snorted and kissed the underside of my chin. “Such a possessive mate,” she purred, slipping her hands over my neck. She pulled me down and kissed my jaw, my cheek, and my ear, where she whispered, “It was my brother who kissed the top of my head, Night. You better keep those teeth to yourself or I’ll kick your ass.”

Desire curled in my stomach. If the Alpha ceremony wasn’t so close, I’d have bedded the hell out of this woman right then and there. As things were, I slipped my hands over her hips and kissed her long and slow. She tasted sweet and hot and completely mine.

All too soon, she pulled away. Her hand found my cheek, her thumb pressing gently to my lips. “Down, boy,” she whispered.

Mm. I couldn’t get enough of this woman.

She stepped out of my embrace so she could change into the simple, earth-toned wrap Glenda had given her for the ceremony. I tried not to go wild at the sight of her smooth back and that perfect ass, but it was hard. So I focused on getting dressed.

“Were the Kings receptive to your help?” she asked. “I didn’t get to talk

to you about it before we met with the council.”

“It went better than I was expecting. There was almost a fight, but I think it helped clear the air more than anything else.”

“Oh good!” At her happy tone, I had to turn around. She had wrapped the dress around her shoulders and waist, cinching it tight at her side to show off her curves. She tied the excess fabric of the wrap into a bow, the tail ends of it dropping to her ankles.

When I had seen the cloth draped over the bed, I hadn’t thought much of it. But now, seeing it on, I loved the way the deep brown fabric looked against my mate’s skin. It almost matched the chestnut color of her hair.

“Bryn,” I said gently.

She looked at me.

“I’d thought it would be impossible for me to forgive the Kings. All my life, I believed I would hang on to the anger and vengeance that pushed me to become Alpha in the first place. But after I met you, I don’t feel the same way. It’s so weird to me to see how far I’ve come from the night we first met, but I want to work on being better for you, on letting it all go.”

“Oh, Night.” She gave me a smile that I could wage—or end—a war for. “I love you.”

I reached for her hand, and she gave it freely. I kissed the back of her fingers, and she giggled. “Why don’t you tell me about your day? What did you do after I left?”

“Not much.” She pulled her hand out of mine and slipped past me to the bathroom. “I kind of just walked around to clear my head.”

“That makes sense. I know you have a ton on your mind.” I buttoned my pants and pulled on a button-up shirt. I swore that when I took over as Alpha, I’d do anything I could to smooth out the worry I saw pulling her mouth into a frown as she used the mirror to help her put on makeup. “Do you have your pick for beta?”

“I do.” She paused, and then she said, “It’s going to be Tavi.”

I paused. I knew I shouldn’t have been so surprised. She and my sister had been even closer than sisters ever since they met. I wanted to be happy that Bryn would choose to give Tavi such an honor, but doubt gnawed at me. Would she really be the best choice for the position? Dr. Stan assured us that she was physically healthy, but there were lingering mental scars that might affect her ability to protect Bryn. The position wouldn’t be permanent, and I believed that my mate knew what she was doing, but that doubt lingered.

“Does Tavi know?” I asked.

Bryn nodded. “We talked about her concerns. We both took them into consideration and weighed them against the position. We think it would be good for her recovery.”

I wanted to believe that my mate and sister had considered the weight of all of this, but neither of them were experienced with being an Alpha or a beta.

“I think it’s possible that having some responsibility might help keep her mind off things, but it could backfire, couldn’t it?”

“Anything could go wrong, but we trust each other, Night. She’s already acted as my beta in other ways.”

I blinked. “You mean her being at the meeting earlier today?”

“Yes. She helped me with that meeting, but she was also with me when I was trying to figure out how the reconstruction projects were going a couple of days ago. She’s had my back both times.”

I ran my hand through my hair, considering this new info. It did make me feel a bit better knowing that they’d tried Tavi in that role, but were a couple of test runs enough?

“Bryn, are *you* sure that she’s the best choice? Your beta is supposed to be your right hand. You need to be able to trust them more than you trust yourself.”

“I’ve thought about this a lot, Night. I’ve considered every other option—I’ve even considered having a King as my beta just as a show of goodwill. But I chose Tavi because of what you’ve said. I trust her implicitly, and I’m positive that she’s the only person for the job.”

I took in her words and tried to understand them. It still worried me, but I trusted my mate's judgment. If she said she’d thought this through, then I believed her.

I was still concerned about Tavi. She tended to bottle up her worries, especially when she was going through a tough time. I wanted to speak with her myself, just to make sure that she truly understood the gravity of becoming a beta.

“I hear you,” I said with a sigh. “And I trust you. I know Tavi is doing her best.”

Bryn finished up her makeup and turned to give me a hug. “She’s doing even better than that. Trust me.”

We walked hand in hand to the ceremony. Everyone was gathering in the

eastern corner of the territory, where a large bonfire was already raging. Behind us, the sun had started to set. I could see the Kings' infirmary nearby, and I spotted a few faces peering through the windows. I wondered how many of those injured were hurt in an altercation with my pack and how many of them had been hurt by Troy or Gregor.

As we walked through the crowd, we heard some whispers, some not too quiet, about Bryn not being good enough. Some talked about her using witch magic to shift, though she had already told them how the shift happened. I glanced at my mate and was pleased to find that she held her head high. Looking at her, I would have believed that she couldn't hear them at all.

I walked Bryn to a wooden platform and kissed her quickly before I went to find my people. The Wargs were comparatively a much smaller group. Not as many wolves had showed up as I would have liked, but the dozens who had were better than my most optimistic estimates. They stood together, glancing from side to side, concerned that the Kings were staging an attack, but once I joined them, they relaxed. They knew that I wouldn't let anything happen to them under my watch.

Dom joined me, and Tavi stood on my other side. She stared up at the platform to watch Bryn cross the stage. I watched, too. My mate was so graceful as she moved, with the fire glowing across her skin. An angel.

"Bryn Hunter," the Elders began, "your vows will be ironclad to the pack for the duration of your service. Speak them now."

She took a deep breath and began to speak. "To the pack, I vow to put my best first, to protect the pack, and to lead them justly. To the spirits of the pack mothers, I vow to be a caring leader, one who will love my pack as family, and to bring honor to the shifter community. To myself, I vow to stay healthy and strong, so I can fight to protect my people." As she finished her vows, her eyes glowed that ethereal blue hue.

An Elder removed a ceremonial blade from his robes, one I'd had my people check thoroughly for poison, and sliced the palm of Bryn's hand. She held the blood there for a moment so it could pool, and then fed it to the bonfire. It sizzled the moment it hit the flames.

My wolf and I both could have died happily knowing that this was the person we were tied to for the rest of our lives. There was silence from both packs. The Wargs were filled with reverence, I could feel the pulse of it almost as surely as I felt the pulse of my own. The Kings, however, were harder to gauge. Most seemed determined to give away nothing with their

expressions. But there were just a few, the mothers and the young women in particular, who bit their lips or clutched their hands to their chests. They almost looked...hopeful.

“And who will be your beta? Your trusted right hand who will advise you through the happiest times and the hardest times of your service?”

She looked over at the crowd as she replied, “Octavia Black.”

There was a mixture of applause and dismayed gasps from the crowd. It made sense; it was unheard of for a new Alpha to choose a beta from another pack, but there was nothing ordinary about this ceremony. That said, I imagine it didn't help that both their Alpha and their beta would be women. Beside me, Dom gave a sharp gasp. I glanced at him, and found him practically vibrating with excitement.

Tavi walked carefully up the steps to stand next to Bryn.

“Octavia Black, do you swear eternal fealty to Bryn, your Alpha?”

She nodded, staring into the fire below. “I do.”

“Do you swear to protect your Alpha and your pack with your life for the duration of your service?”

“I do.”

“Do you swear to counsel your Alpha through the duration of their leadership, guiding her to the best of your ability and in the best interest of the pack?”

She nodded and looked at Bryn. “Yes, I do.”

“Then it is done. The decision is made.”

The Wargs' section of the crowd began to clap as the ceremony came to a close. I saw that some of the Kings women looked like they wanted to clap, too, but stayed quiet with the rest of their pack. That was alright; it was a start. I looked again at Dom to find him grinning wide. I understood already that he had feelings for Tavi; I would have had to be blind not to see the cat and mouse game that the two of them had spent the last few months playing. But I hadn't voiced my knowledge to either of them.

Now, with the changes that had come over Tavi as a result of Troy's kidnapping, I wasn't sure where they stood. But I accepted that it wasn't really my business. If Dom was going to make a move, then he needed to be brave enough to admit his feelings to Tavi first. Until he did that, I'd keep my opinions to myself.

Afterward, the celebration could begin in earnest. Most of the Kings went home rather than celebrate, but there were more than enough Wargs to make

it a party, so we were determined to eat and drink enough for those who had left.

“Congrats, Tav,” I said. “I’m so proud of you.”

She paused and turned a smile on me that was a little something like it used to be. “Thanks, Night.”

She went on to share a few words with her closest Wargs friends, but she avoided anything that would tie her up longer than a few seconds. Even Jasper couldn’t get a conversation out of her. She made a beeline for Bryn, who was surrounded by Wargs and family.

Bryn received a huge hug and a slew of kisses from Glenda and Violet, and dozens of other wolves crowded her to tell her how proud they were of her. Finally, she peeled away to hug Tavi. I knew Dom wanted to speak to Tavi, but before he could, she had said something to Bryn, hugged her again, and then quickly walked away. As happy as Tavi must have been about all of this, she had been out and about for a while. I couldn’t hold it against her if she needed to recover at her cabin.

Though disappointed, Dom quickly threw himself back into the festivities, dancing and drinking like his life depended on it. I could relate. I tried repeatedly to get close to Bryn, but someone new would always come in and whisk her away.

Pax was a bit too young for these festivities, but he almost pitched a fit when his mother told him it was near his bedtime. He wouldn’t go until he had spent some more time with Bryn. She took his hands and spun with him in time with the music, but the pup pouted.

“What’s wrong, Pax?” she asked.

“I thought you were going to pick me as your beta,” he grumbled.

She laughed and spun him again. “You’ve got a little more growing up to do, Pax, but one day, you can be an Alpha if you want to.”

“An Alpha?” His eyes glittered at the thought. He paused in his dancing to pull up his sleeves. He flexed for the crowd, drawing a laugh out of us all.

“I’m surprised she curried the favor of so many Wargs in just a few weeks,” said a voice next to me.

I tensed briefly, but relaxed once I realized that it was just Evan.

“Imagine watching it happen in real time,” I said with a grin. “My girl had them eating out of the palm of her hand in a week.”

“She must be something special to have that kind of magnetism.”

I was content to sit back and admire my mate, the Alpha, but as the night

wore on, I wanted some alone time with her. I finished off my beer and caught her when she, laughing at something Frankie said, walked backward into my arms.

“Hey there,” I said as she turned. “I hope you’re not too tired for a dance with me.”

She beamed up at me. “Never.”

A slow song began to play, and I looped an arm around her waist while the other held her hand. She smoothed her hands over my shoulders, and we swayed to the music.

“You must feel on top of the world,” I said.

“Almost,” she said. “I’ll get there once you and I finally have our ceremony.”

Fuck me, had she always been so smooth? “You sure know how to make a man feel wanted.”

She giggled and squeezed my hand. “I wish Tavi could have stayed longer, but she told me she was feeling tired.”

I nodded. “Maybe she’ll stay longer at our binding ceremony.”

“I hope so.” When her smile began to wane, I led her into a spin that made her laugh. It was illegal for her to feel anything negative right now. This night was all about Bryn, and how incredible she was.

“You’re pretty light on your feet for such a big, bad Alpha,” she said. “Who knew you could be so gentle?”

I chuckled and dipped her to the whooping applause of onlookers. “I think you know exactly how gentle I can be,” I said, and kissed her.

She bit her lip as I lifted her up, her gaze the blue of fire. I knew exactly what she wanted, what she needed. Hell, in my mind I was halfway to our cabin already. As the slow song ended, she opened her mouth to say what was on both of our minds. Before she could speak, our mothers literally, and very dramatically, pulled her away.

“Sorry, Night,” Glenda said with a teasing smirk. “You’re not allowed to see her before the night of your binding ceremony. Tonight, she’s spending time with us.”

“What?” Bryn asked, confused and a bit dazed. “What?”

“I know, sweetie, you’re so tired and you have to get some rest at my cabin.” Glenda and my mom led her away.

“Mom, not you, too!” I called after them.

“It’s tradition, kid,” she replied, like that would help. “But don’t worry,

you'll have her all to yourself tomorrow.”

“I'll hold you to that!”

The remaining Wargs laughed at our antics, and I laughed with them. I wouldn't have my mate with me tonight, which would be tough, but this was too warm and sweet of a night for even that to sour my mood. I felt like for the first time in my life, things were going right.

BRYN

I woke the next day in the bed I thought I'd never sleep in again. As my eyelids parted to the sunlight peering in through my window, I took in the familiar sights and smells of my childhood bedroom. The worn quilt that Mom had sewed me for my fourteenth birthday, the dried wildflowers decorating the walls and surfaces, the overloaded bookshelves across from the bed.

Though I had spent the majority of my life in this room, it was just now hitting me how small my bedroom was. In the short time that I'd been away, I'd done so much growing up that this space—no matter how nostalgic I felt about it—could no longer contain the person, the *wolf*, I was becoming.

In just a few hours, I would be bound to my soulmate. In a month, the Alpha hopefuls would get together to battle, and Night would come out on top. After that, everything I and Night and the Wargs had worked for would come to pass. Until then, I just had to survive the rest of this month as the temporary Alpha. I would do my best at this, even if I had never intended to assume this position.

I rolled out of bed, showered, put my hair in a towel, and pulled on a terry cloth robe. Mom, Violet, and I enjoyed creamy chai lattes and tomato basil scones with onion jam as the sun rose higher in the sky. I watched the two women chat with each other about their gardens, comparing notes.

"I've always mixed a few coffee grounds in the fertilizer," Mom was saying. "Ever since I started doing that, my plants have been even more flavorful."

"Interesting." Violet nodded. "I've done that for my mums a few times,

but I'd never thought to do it with fruit. How often do you compost?"

I smiled over my cup, enjoying the chatter. Just as I'd hoped, the two of them were fast friends. After twenty years of raising me on her own, after spending those decades without real companionship, it was so nice to see Mom giggle and laugh with someone her own age. It seemed that Violet's passionate, blunt personality meshed well with Mom's easygoing friendliness. It was like they'd always been friends.

Maybe, in some cosmic or magical way, they always had been.

After breakfast, Violet stretched her arms over her head and pushed away from the table. She was recovering nicely. She wasn't able to stay on her feet very long, but that hadn't stopped her from walking as often as she could.

"I should make sure that stubborn son of mine is getting himself ready," she said. "I'll see you soon, Bryn." She walked around the table to kiss my cheek.

"See you, Violet."

"By the way," she said, "I left something for you on the couch."

My eyebrows raised. "Oh, you didn't have to get me anything, Violet. You've already done so much for me."

"I know, girlie. But you know me." She and Mom shared a brief, knowing look. "Don't look at it until it's time."

"Sure, okay."

As Violet headed out, Mom turned to me. "We should get you dressed," she said. "It'll take a while to get your hair to set right."

"Okay. Can we do it here?"

"Of course!"

I grabbed a refill of chai tea while Mom grabbed the tools she needed. She set the curling iron and hair products on the table, and I enjoyed a few more scones and jam as she removed my hair from the towel. First, she gave my neglected ends a trim, then she combed some cream through the long strands.

"So, we haven't had a ton of time to talk," she said, "but I want to hear more about this Night Shepherd."

My body grew warm as I chased the bite of scone down with some tea. It wasn't the liquid that made me feel that way; thinking about Night did.

"It's hard to know where to start," I said. "He's...everything to me. He's so strong and capable and smart, and even though he's busy being the Alpha of the Wargs, he always makes time for me." Just thinking about him made

my chest ache and my wolf purr. “He looks at me like I’m the one who makes the sun come up every morning, like I’m his whole world. He makes me so endlessly happy, and when I’m with him, I just know everything will work out.”

My mom sniffled a bit as she brushed a section of my hair. “Honey, he sounds wonderful.”

“He is.” Wonderful, and so, so much more.

“You said he was the one who took you from Troy’s cabin?”

I nodded. “I thought I hated him at first, but at the same time, I somehow knew that I was safe with him. That he’d take care of me.”

“You know, honey, the fated mate bond is something that’s destined. The fates plan it long before the souls find each other. Fated mates are a perfect match of strength, love, loyalty, and passion. Sounds like you found yours.”

“I did, Mom.” Butterflies rushed to fill my stomach. Soon Night and I would swear our bond to each other in front of everyone, but the butterflies weren’t just for excitement. Talking about fate and destiny made me remember that I had an important role to play in the future. “Mom, Violet and the Wargs’ Elders think I’m descended from the pack mothers. They say that I’m destined to do something more, but they don’t know what that is.”

Mom nodded, fixing my hair with rollers. “I’m not surprised. I’ve always known that fate had a huge hand in my finding you. I’ve also suspected that you might be a pack mother’s daughter, but there weren’t any texts in our libraries that helped me confirm my theory.”

“The Wargs have tons of literature. I think Violet brought some stuff with her. Maybe you guys could compare notes?”

“I’m sure we will.” I heard the smile in her voice. “Alright, now I just need to blow dry your hair so it sets the curls.”

Soon, my hair fell in full, luscious waves over my shoulders, shining in the light every time I turned my head. My makeup was soft and minimal, just enough to enhance my features, and I wore some of Mom’s homemade rose perfume. When it came time to put on the dress, Mom told me to open the box that Violet had left for me. When I did, I found a gorgeous, lilac-colored gown.

I put it on and admired myself in the lobby mirror. Pressed white, baby pink, and lavender flowers were sewn into the flowing hem and at the waist. The bust clung to me, but the fabric was so breathable it felt like a second skin. Spaghetti straps held it up, and across the bust were dozens of tiny,

glittering beads. When I walked, a slit came all the way up to my hip. My eyes watered the longer I stared at myself.

Violet knocked on the door and Mom called for her to come in. I turned to Violet, near tears, and took her hands in mine. “Where did you find this?” I asked.

“I made it myself,” she told me. “It was for my own binding ceremony, but I never got to wear it.”

I gasped. “Violet, I can’t possibly take this! It’s too precious, and I—I’m —” I didn’t know how to put it.

“You’re my new daughter,” she finished. She used a tissue to dab at the corners of her own eyes. “I think this dress was always meant for you, Bryn. That’s why I brought it along in the first place. Why else would you be the exact same dress size as I was when I made the thing?” She laughed and pulled me in for a hug. “You look beautiful, honey.”

I couldn’t say anything but, “Thank you.”

A short time later, Tavi knocked on the door. She was wearing another sheath dress, this one in blue denim. Like me, she was barefoot. She let me hug her.

“I wanted to give you this,” she said, handing me a flower crown. My jaw dropped as I lifted it. The crown was made from the branches of nearby trees. It had fairy slipper, shooting star, as well as western springbeauty woven through it.

She blushed when I continued to admire it without saying anything. “It— it might be kind of silly. I mean, it’s kind of childish for me to do, and you don’t have to wear it.”

“I love it!” I exploded. I put it on right away, and it fell neatly over my curls. “Thank you, Tavi.” I couldn’t stop the tears from flowing. I fanned at my face with both hands. “It’s too early to cry.”

Tavi smiled, and this time, she initiated the hug. It was only for a couple of seconds, and then she quickly pulled away again. I couldn’t believe how fortunate I was to have so many friends and loved ones at my side.

OUR CEREMONY WOULD TAKE place next to my mom’s gardens, so when I opened the door, the guests were assembled right outside. I stepped off the porch, my hair lifting in the cool breeze. Not that long ago, I would have had to wear layers to be out in this weather, but now my wolf kept me warm.

I walked through the guests with Violet, Mom, and Tavi following behind me. It was a private ceremony with only the Wargs and the Elders of both packs to officiate because this day was for Night and me. The last thing we wanted was a large guest list that included the Kings pack; if we had invited them, there would no doubt be snide comments and maybe even a fight or two. We wanted to avoid that at all costs.

I felt like I was floating rather than walking as I neared where Night and Dom stood. Both men wore slacks and loose button-up shirts tucked in. The moment Night looked at me, I saw his eyes widen and his face flush red, and I knew that everything was perfect. Behind me, I heard sniffles and quiet sobs, but I tried hard to keep it together.

“Bryn, Night,” Elder Patrice of the Wargs began, “please join hands.”

We did so immediately, both of us eager to touch after spending the night apart. Once our fingers were intertwined, Violet approached with a white silk scarf. She wrapped it around our joined hands.

I looked up at Night and bit my lip when it began to tremble. It was time now for us to speak our love for each other. I’d spent so long thinking of what I wanted to say, and now I was just trying to keep it together.

One traitorous tear slipped free, but Night leaned forward to kiss it away. “You are stunning,” he whispered just before he pulled back.

That was the encouragement I needed. “Night,” I began, “so much has happened in my life that I never expected, but almost all of it has ended up being a blessing in one way or another.” I squeezed his hand. “The last thing I expected in the midst of all of the chaos and laughter and tears and joy was to fall so hard for you. From this moment, I will treasure you forever, and I intend to spend every second of the rest of my life by your side.”

He let out a long breath and squeezed my hand back. “When I first met you, I was a mess. I had schedules and promises to keep, and a goal in mind that I was prepared to die for. But the moment I saw you, everything shifted. I had thought that love was a luxury that I couldn’t indulge in, but you chased me in my dreams, baby,” he said. “How could I not fall for you?”

I bit my lip again, my heart swelling with love for my mate.

“I know our relationship started with me stealing you away into the night, but it’s because you stole my heart that we’ve made it to this moment.”

That brought laughter in addition to the sniffles, from me as well as the crowd.

“It’s yours to keep for as long as you want it,” he said, a whispered

promise between the two of us.

“And mine is yours.”

“With these words,” Elder Patrice declared, “you two are bound in the eyes of the witnesses, the Elders, and the pack mothers. With a kiss, the ceremony is sealed.”

This time, using our tied hands as leverage, I was the one who pulled Night in close. We kissed to the sound of resounding clapping and cheering, and as we parted we pressed our foreheads together. Inside, my wolf gave a keening, joyous howl, and I could feel an echoing one from Night’s.

Another celebration began, but this, too, was limited to our guests. We had thought about inviting both packs to the celebration, but Night made the wise point that alcohol plus animosity did not equal a good time. So, we kept things intimate and private.

Because we were officially bound, the scarf that Violet had used to tie us together was removed. I now wore it tied around my waist like a belt. The soft, snow-white went well with the lilac of my dress.

To start off the party, Night and I began to dance with our guests. I’d learned a few of the traditional dances, but there were still a few that were a mystery to me. Night and I stayed close to each other though we occasionally danced with other partners. We couldn’t stop looking at each other or touching each other as we passed by. We danced for hours and hours, until the sky grew dark.

I hadn’t eaten anything since that morning’s tea and scones, so before long, hunger sent me to the buffet. I took Night’s hand and we walked together to load up our plates. Sausages and steak and pork loin, roasted veggies, mashed potatoes—all of it cooked to perfection. Flavors melded together on my tongue in a way that made me hum with pleasure. Beside me, Night leaned over to nuzzle my ear.

Tavi stayed a bit longer than she had after the Alpha ceremony, but she left early again. This time, she was able to use our telepathic bond to let me know that she was headed out. That was an eerie, new experience, being able to hear someone else in my thoughts. But just like finding out I had a wolf, I was sure I’d get used to the sensation soon.

I scanned the party until I met her gaze. I nodded, and she slipped away. I caught Night’s eye, and I saw that he understood even though I hadn’t explained what’d happened. I guessed this was what having a soulmate was like.

Shortly after Tavi left, Evan approached our table. He bowed slightly. “Congratulations, love birds,” he said. “I have to admit, Night, I hardly recognized you standing next to such a beauty.”

We laughed. “You’re telling me.” Night looked at me. “I don’t think I’ll ever stop feeling like this is all part of some wonderful dream.”

My heart sang as I reached to touch his cheek. “I think I’m the lucky one here,” I said.

Night’s eyes started to glow that wonderful jewel-green, and I felt desire begin to stir inside me. I knew Night felt it, too; I saw it in the slight shift of his eye color from jewel- to pine-green. Evan cleared his throat, interrupting the connection.

“I’m sorry to do this to you two, but I have a report.” He leaned forward and spoke in a hushed voice. The smile he wore for us had already disappeared. “Two more of the Kings have slipped away.”

My eyes widened. “Two more?” *When did the first group leave?* I looked from Night to Evan and back. I saw a slight twitch in Night’s cheek, and I knew he’d kept that information from me.

“Who was it?” Night asked, his voice rougher as he grew serious.

“Samson and Harlon.”

“Oh.” I crossed my legs under the table and set my chin in my hand. “They approached me a few days ago. They made a few threats.”

“What?” Night’s attention snapped back to me. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because I knew it was all talk.”

“Bryn, they might have been serious—”

“I know, I know what you’re going to say, Night, but I think it’s apparent that we’ve both kept a few secrets from each other.”

His mouth shut after I said that.

Evan stepped back. The slightly amused smile was back on his face. “I think I’ll take that as my sign to leave...if you have no further orders for me, Night.”

“No, nothing further,” he replied without looking. “You’ve got the rest of the night off.”

When Evan walked away, Night leaned closer to me. “I wish you’d told me about them, Bryn. Maybe I could’ve done something.”

“I wish you’d told me about the people leaving,” I retorted. “Maybe I could have done something.”

We stared hard at each other for a few seconds until I let my annoyance roll off of me. I felt it drip from my shoulders, down my arms, and to the ground below. When it was gone, I held Night's face in my hands.

"I think the reason we're so worked up about this is because we're all wound up in *other* ways," I told him.

He caught my drift. I watched his own frustration begin to melt out of his expression, replaced with understanding and a focused hunger.

"Let's not fight about this now, Night," I went on. "We have the rest of our lives to talk and fight and confess our secrets to each other, but tonight?" I leaned forward until our lips were almost touching. "I just want to focus on you and me."

"I want to go back to the cabin." His voice was little more than a growling whisper. "Now."

"Then let's go."

NIGHT

The two of us slipped away while no one was looking.

We melted into the darkness, both of us laughing, drunk on each other's closeness. I couldn't keep my hands off Bryn. Whether it was her wrist or her hip, or that perfect ass, there wasn't a part of her that I didn't covet. She was just as eager, pulling at my shirt or my hand, or running her hands over my chest.

With all of that touching, we didn't make it all the way to the cabin.

Bryn, giggling, pulled me slightly into the woods at our right, away from any passersby. She leaned back against an oak tree and tugged me along with her by my shirt. I caught myself, my forearm pressed to the trunk above her head, and my lips found hers as if by magic.

She was amazing, and free, and warm. She tasted and smelled like the sweetest rose. My cock strained against my pants as she unbuttoned my shirt, pushing it down over my shoulders. Every brush of her skin had me panting with need. It was just the two of us out here, with only crickets and the fluttering of moth's wings to keep us company.

"I'm in love with you," I told her between kisses. "I'm fucking obsessed with you."

My little wild thing leapt up and wrapped her legs around my waist. She ground herself against me and I moaned low into her mouth. Electric pleasure pulsed along my skin, raising goosebumps, stoking lust.

"Show me right here," she begged, grinding again. "Right now."

I pressed biting kisses down her jaw and over her neck. I licked the spot of my claiming bite, and we both shivered at the sweet ecstasy.

One of my hands cupped her ass, the other caressed up and down her thigh. I inched higher and higher, eager to find the waistband of her panties so I could make her scream my name loud enough to wake the entire compound.

But then my wolf sensed something that instantly put me on high alert. I stopped cold and turned my head. Bryn continued to kiss my face, but my attention was on the surrounding area. There was danger, and it was close by.

It didn't take her long to realize that my mood had changed. "Night, are you okay?"

I set her gently back down and moved in front of her, so that she stood between me and the tree. "I'm not sure," I said. "Something's wrong."

"What?" She grew quiet and tried to listen. "I don't feel anything..."

"No, you probably won't. You haven't fully attuned with your wolf just yet." I tore my eyes from the trees around us and looked down at her. "You need to head back to the cabin. I'll check this out."

"No." She stepped around me. "We're going to check it out."

I shook my head. "It's not safe."

She frowned at me. "So you think it's better for me to find my way home on my own in the dead of night?"

Well. She had a point.

"Night, I'm officially the Alpha of the Kings now. Even though it's temporary, I can't let danger lurk around while I go and hide somewhere else. If something's up, I need to be there to help. My pack needs to see me helping."

Damn. Another good point. I didn't like it, but if we wanted to merge these packs, we needed to present a united front. She was right; we couldn't afford for her to come off as weak.

"Fine," I said, "but stay close."

Her frown eased into a smile, and she took my hand. "Always, my love."

We emerged from the trees and returned to the main path. I let my wolf guide us toward the danger, but as we neared it, I started to feel like the threat was coming from all directions. We were close to the center of the compound, which only heightened my anxiety. If our guests had started departing, they should all be near this area. It made my skin itch to know that there was so much danger so close to our loved ones.

We drew nearer still, and then I felt Bryn shiver beside me. I turned to ask her what was wrong, but howls of pain split the night. My heart jumped to

my throat. I recognized one of those howls—my beta. And from the sounds of it, he was in the middle of a fight.

Bryn and I sprinted to the center of the compound, which was already a mess. People had been knocked over, their clothes ruined. Whatever food they'd brought from the ceremony was scattered across the ground. Bryn gasped and immediately bent to help the nearest wolf, making sure they were alive. I spotted Jasper heading somewhere—likely to wherever Dom was fighting, but I caught him as he dashed by.

“Go check on Tavi and my mother,” I ordered. “Make sure they’re safe.”

“Yes, Alpha.” He nodded, and then sprinted off.

Kings wolves had started to leave their homes to check on what was going on. Many of the men there tried to assess the danger, but they were obviously just as confused as I was. Women, too, were drawn toward the commotion.

“Hey,” I called to one of the male Kings. “What the fuck is going on?”

“Our borders are under siege,” he said, eyes glowing. He looked like he was close to shifting. “Ferals are all over the goddamn place.”

“How could this happen?” Bryn demanded. She stood, her hands and the hem of her dress stained in blood.

“We were taken by surprise, Alpha Hunter,” he replied. “Ferals have never, ever attacked us on our own turf.”

Shock panged through me. Of course. This sort of organization from ferals was unheard of. They were too few and far between to mount a concerted attack like this. And yet, another guard entered the area holding a bloodied woman in his arms. Bryn hadn't had time to establish a telepathic link with her team. It was like the ferals knew that and were taking advantage of it. But that should have been impossible.

“Did we fuck with them somehow?” Bryn asked. “What would lead them to do this?”

“I don't know,” he replied, his eyes growing wild. “There haven't been any reports. No one is telling me anything!”

Bryn and I looked at each other. The man was losing his cool.

“What are you thinking, Night?” she asked.

Despite the chaos, my heart beat with pride for her. She was so fierce, but she wasn't afraid to ask for help. Looking at her now reminded me of how brave she'd looked right after she had defeated Troy in the challenge ceremony.

“Listen up,” I called, using my Alpha voice. “I need every available man out where the border patrols are.” That would reinforce our numbers. “I’ll be right behind you.”

Men who had been wandering around without aim straightened now that they had orders. They began to spread equally to the northern, eastern, western, and southern borders. I turned to Bryn before I followed them.

“I know you’ve got to go,” she said with a sad smile. “Some start to our honeymoon, huh? A war breaks out and my first day as Alpha goes to shit.”

I shook my head. “This is *not* your fault. Something fucked up is happening. But I promise you, we’ll get to the bottom of this. Together.”

She nodded.

“In the meantime, you stay here and care for the wounded.”

She nodded again, but there was a more determined edge to it. “Come back to me.”

I kissed her quickly, fiercely. “I will always come back to you.”

BRYN

Night shifted and sprinted off to see where he could help in the fight, and I turned back to the chaos around me. Wolves were carrying their wounded on their backs and on makeshift gurneys, looking lost as hell. Those on the ground remained motionless and unattended. Women lingered near the edges of the site, unsure how to help.

I looked down at myself. I was still decked out in this lovely dress. This was not the attire of an Alpha who was needed by her people.

“Hey!” I called. I didn’t quite have the force of the Alpha voice on my side, but I sounded commanding enough to get the attention of those who were still able-bodied. “Leave the wounded here for treatment. It’s too risky to try and carry them to the infirmary on the eastern corner.” As those carrying the wounded began to follow my orders, I turned to the women. “Claire, bring me a pair of pants and a t-shirt that you don’t mind getting bloody. As for the rest of you, bring back your medicines, your gauzes, your linens, and every first-aid item you can think of.”

I pulled my hair up into a bun, securing it with Tavi’s flower crown. In minutes, Claire had returned with the clothes, and Mom and Violet arrived to help. Behind Violet, Dr. Stan was on the way to us. I changed into my new outfit in seconds and tossed the dress into a nearby tree.

Women returned with hand sanitizer and water and everything else they had, and I directed them to assist those who were least injured. Dr. Stan took the lead on caring for those most seriously injured, and Mom and Violet, who both had medical experience, assisted him there. I dropped to my knees and began putting all the first-aid knowledge I had from school and from my

mother to real use.

Seconds passed like minutes, and minutes like hours. I wiped sweat from my brow and pressed cloth to the bleeding chest wound of a Kings wolf before moving on to help a Kings woman hold down a Wargs man while he was stitched up. I quickly learned that pack lines blurred on a battlefield. Trish, Tanya, and Tara sobbed nearby. For them, and for many of these women, it was the first time they'd ever seen so much blood and death. They clutched each other desperately as they looked on at the chaos. They weren't helping, but at least they weren't getting in the way. I would have been just like them if I hadn't had the experience in the cave on the Wargs' territory, and if I hadn't fought Troy myself.

I spotted Tyrell and Vince and Frankie bringing even more wounded our way. Fifteen injured became twenty, twenty became thirty, thirty became forty-five. The numbers dipped when we lost someone. Meanwhile, the battle waged on.

"Fuck this," I whispered to myself, pausing in my work to help a group of women carry over a cauldron full of water. "This is insane." We set the cauldron on top of a raging fire to start boiling water.

As I resumed the bloody work, my addled brain slowly pieced together what Night had probably figured out before we'd even parted ways. Some-fucking-how, wolves as feral as the ones who had almost killed Vince and me in that cave a few weeks ago had organized themselves for this attack. That was unheard of in itself, but what was even more incredible was the fact that this had to have been a strategic effort. Otherwise, the battle would have been decided shortly after it started.

I wasn't a warrior, but I could put two and two together. By attacking the border patrols that were spaced out with only a few wolves at each location, the ferals could do more damage than launching a full attack on the pack. My army was much larger than the ferals, and with the Wargs here as well, we presented an even larger force, but there was no protocol for a concerted feral attack like this. Ferals were vicious, crazed attackers, and from what I'd heard from Night, they wouldn't hesitate to kill a child, let alone a full-grown wolf.

Please, Night, I thought, wiping blood from my hands and arms so I could help rip linen into strips for wraps. *Please, please be safe.* My wolf keened inside me. I didn't understand why, but I knew she was telling me that he was in danger. I needed to get to him asap, but I couldn't abandon my

post here...

“Bryn!”

My head snapped up. Jasper and Tavi were sprinting my way. From what I could see, neither of them were injured, which set my heart at ease, though the wide, terrified expression on Tavi’s face left me feeling chilled to the bone.

“It’s great to see you both,” I said. “Jasper, I’m sure you’ve got to go help Night?”

“I’m on my way now.”

“Okay. Be safe.”

He reached for my arm and squeezed. “You too.”

As he sprinted off, I turned to Tavi. Now that she was close, I realized that her eyes, though still haunted, were laser-focused. She met my gaze head-on without wavering the way she’d been doing lately.

“Where do you need me, Alpha?” she asked.

My heart banged hard against my chest. “Tavi, are you sure you’re up to this?”

“Fuck no,” she replied. “I’m scared out of my mind, but I can keep it together for now. I want to do a good job as your beta.”

I wanted to hug her, but it wasn’t the time or the place. “Get yourself covered in sanitizer. I need those linens ripped into strips.”

She nodded. “I can do that.”

“And in the meantime, these women need direction. Dr. Stan or Violet or my mom can help you if you’re stuck, but our biggest issue is setting up another area to help the wounded.”

“Right, but Bryn?” Her eyebrows knitted together. “Are you going somewhere?”

“I have to speak to Night.” We needed to work together to find the location of the person pulling the strings.

“Okay. You can count on me.”

I nodded, and then ran off. I reached out to my wolf to help guide me to the closest location where there was danger—the northern border. On the way, I spotted Dom with an injured young wolf draped across his shoulders and another wolf under each arm. He was naked, and he was bleeding from cuts and bites along his body, but he couldn’t have transported three wolves to safety in his wolf form.

“Dom, bring the injured to the center of the compound. Tavi and a few

others have more injured gathered there.”

He nodded and increased his pace.

“Wait, where’s Night?”

“He’s at the eastern border. That’s where most of the ferals are coming in.”

“Got it!” I altered course and pushed myself to run faster. The sound of chaos and fighting grew worse as I got closer to the border. Above the spot where the worst of the fighting was localized was a small rock formation. On top of that formation stood Harlon and Samson, wearing twin manic grins.

Something told me it wasn’t a coincidence that on the same day the two of them abandoned the pack, the feral attack began. They were behind this somehow, but I couldn’t fight them on my own. I needed Night.

NIGHT

After I left Dom to fight at the northern border, I headed to the eastern border. My wolves there were telling me that was where the fighting had started and where the majority of ferals were gathered. When I arrived, I found ferals engaged in a close battle with Wargs and Kings warriors. But our forces were struggling.

The problem was that they were out of sync. Without organization, they couldn't work together, so our wolves fought in groups of all Wargs or all Kings, but that only made them easier targets for ferals to overtake or attack from behind. This was my worst fears come to life—not used to working together, both packs were allowing gaps in formation and making it easier for the enemy to slip past. I didn't want to think about how many ferals were running wild behind the border. I couldn't.

I let out a long, echoing growl—an Alpha's growl that brought a momentary pause in the fighting. Even the ferals were paralyzed for a moment. They wouldn't be able to hear my thoughts, but it would stun them. In that time, I seized control of both Wargs and Kings fighters and sent out an open call for anyone in the area to hear.

“Group up in front of me!” I was grateful when not just the Wargs, but Kings also scrambled to follow my orders rather than push back. They must have realized that they had loved ones in danger just like we did.

Just as wolves began to form an arrow of several lines in front of me, the ferals snapped out of their momentary stun. That trick wouldn't work again, but that was fine. This time, we presented a united front.

I wanted to join the fray at the point of the arrow, but I kept close to the

back so I could pick off any ferals who managed to slip past our defense. I intercepted one such wolf, grabbing hold of his back paw with my teeth and tossing him into another feral who tried to help him. In front of me, a young Kings wolf, no older than sixteen, didn't notice that there was a feral sneaking up to flank him.

When the feral went in for the attack, I cut him off, grabbing him by the scruff of his neck and biting down until I felt bone give way between my jaws.

"*You alright, kid?*" I asked, letting the feral drop.

"*Y-yeah,*" he said. "*Thank you.*"

"*Don't mention it. Just stay sharp.*"

The fight wore on and the sky turned black. I wasn't exhausted yet, but I was surprised by how determined these ferals were. Ferals were usually cowardly and skittish. How the hell had they joined forces so powerfully?

The telltale scent of flowers hit my nose, and I whipped my head around. Bryn was coming here? Why?

While my attention was on her, a feral slipped by me. It was headed in Bryn's direction. I sprinted after it, zig-zagging between the trees. Ahead, I saw Bryn running toward me in her human form. She was already covered in blood, and that horrible sight caused me to lose it.

The feral roared and leapt for her. My heart dropped. Bryn hit the dirt, and for too many milliseconds, I couldn't see her. I didn't know if she was still there, but then the feral passed over her, and I saw her crouched low to the ground. Relief rushed at me even as rage flooded my blood. The feral skidded gracelessly into the trunk of a tree, and I lunged for it. Before it could recover, my jaws were locked around its throat. With a roar, I forced it down onto its back.

It whimpered beneath me until my fangs closed and blood gushed from the fatal wound. The feral taken care of, I turned to Bryn. She was just getting to her feet, but my wolf and I were so desperate to check on her that I almost knocked her over again when I poked at her with my nose, prodding at the spots of blood that stained her shirt and pants.

"*I'm okay, I'm okay,*" she said, pushing me away. "*It's not my blood.*"

Thank everything for that. "*What the hell are you doing here?*" I demanded. "*You're supposed to be with the wounded!*"

"*I know.*" She met my eyes. "*But my wolf was telling me that you were in danger, and I had to see you.*"

“Bryn, I can take care of myself, dammit! But you, you’re not even in your wolf form.” She could have died right in front of me. That feral could have ripped her head off and then...then where would I be?

“I took down Troy when I was half-dead, Night,” she told me. “I know my wolf and I aren’t totally in sync, but I trust her to save me when I need her.”

This woman! I stomped the ground, but she kept talking before I could argue further.

“More importantly, I think I know who’s behind this.” She pointed over my head toward the rock formation that overlooked the battle ground. “I saw Harlon and Samson standing up there on my way over here. But they ran back toward the compound when the feral leapt at me.”

“Of fucking course.” I was frustrated at the fact that they’d managed to slip past me, and decided I’d take it out on them by making them both corpses as soon as possible.

“I think they’re heading to the patrol point out by my mom’s cabin. There’s an unguarded hidden path there that leads from one small cave to another. I used to play there when I was young.”

“Tell me where it is, and I’ll end this myself.”

“I can’t give you specific directions. I don’t remember it well enough. I have to show you. I’ll remember it when I see it.”

I growled in frustration. The absolute last thing I wanted was to take Bryn with me into what would likely be the lion’s den, but I couldn’t stand around and argue about it either. It wasn’t safe for her to be here, but I couldn’t leave with her when this point of the border was still so unstable. Not to mention, we had been lucky that the Kings were too busy to see us arguing. That would undermine her power, and mine when I became their Alpha.

This was a bad situation all around.

Fortunately, just in the nick of fucking time, I saw Dom sprinting our way. I gave him a rundown of what was going on as he neared.

“You need me to take control of this sinking ship?” he asked. *“I’ve got you.”*

“Thanks, Dom.”

“You’re a lifesaver. Literally,” Bryn added.

He winked and headed off to take my position at the back of the line. Bryn shifted, shook off the clothes that still clung to her, and the two of us took off. Bryn, who was a bit faster than me, held the lead as she took me

back to the compound. We headed toward Glenda's cabin, and then passed it. The cave in question was just behind the tree line at the back of the cabin.

Actually, "cave" was a generous word; the entrance was little more than a hole in the ground surrounded by boulders. It was a tight fit. Even Bryn would have to crawl on her belly to get through it. After me, of course.

I dove into the hole and shimmied as quickly and quietly as I could manage. I was eager to end this, but I didn't want to lose any element of surprise we might still have. Eventually, the hole widened into a larger cavern. I shook dust and dirt from my fur and made room for Bryn to crawl through and do the same. My hackles raised as the scent of ferals hit me. My sense of smell was much faster than my eyes could adjust to the darkness.

We weren't the only ones here.

Given the evidence of camp supplies and bedding, it was obvious that here was where the ferals and presumably Harlon and Samson had gathered to plan the attack. My rage spiked knowing that all this had gone on so close to Glenda's cabin. A force capable of knocking both the Kings and the Wargs onto our back feet had been literally under our noses. At any time, they could have killed Bryn or Glenda—anyone who happened to stumble onto their hideout.

"We tried to warn you, bitch," Samson's voice sounded from the very back of the cave. He and Harlon emerged from the darkness, surrounded by ferals. "We tried to tell you that your days as Alpha were numbered."

BRYN

Still reeling from the discovery that this cavern was used as headquarters for the attack, I was immediately hit with the knowledge that it wasn't just Harlon and Samson waiting for us, but also at least ten more ferals ready to take Night and I out. I stood next to my mate, trembling—not with fear but with adrenaline. We weren't going to be able to talk our way out of this one.

“Should've got rid of us when you had the chance,” Harlon said, his voice echoing against the walls. “Maybe you would've been able to prevent some of this.”

The words stung, but I ignored his taunting for now.

“Any strategies, Night?” I asked.

“Stay close—”

He had barely had time to think the words when three of the ferals launched themselves at us. Night growled as two of them came at him. That left me with one. I sidestepped its charge and butted my head against its body. When it stumbled, I rushed forward, slamming its body into the cave wall. It bounced off and lay still, but it was still breathing. Behind me, the two ferals had managed to get Night onto his back.

Before I could move in to help, one of the other ferals noticed my opponent was down. The wolf whirled on me and sprinted my way. My mind raced, but I didn't have enough room to maneuver. There was no time to react.

Night roared, bucking off the feral that held him on the ground, and launched himself at the feral that was coming after me. He tackled it before it

could reach me, and his teeth, just as they had with the other feral, darted down to imbed themselves in its throat. Blood spurted from the wound to stain the cave wall.

I turned from the sight, my stomach turning all over again.

“Are you alright?” Night asked, spitting blood.

“I’m fine. Just pissed that I let myself get trapped like that.”

He moved so he stood slightly in front of me. *“Use that anger to your advantage, Bryn,”* he said. *“Harness it into usable power.”*

I narrowed my eyes at his back. Two more wolves split off from the group of gleaming predatory eyes and sprinted our way. I braced myself for the attack, but Night rushed ahead to meet them, leaving me behind.

The first feral lunged at him, and he met it head-on. It tried to tackle him but couldn’t get him off his feet. He bit its shoulder, sending more blood spraying into the air, and tossed him away. The second feral slipped past him and headed my way, but Night didn’t let it get too close. He bit the back of its neck and shook until a sharp crack split through the cave.

More death. It was too much. Too wrong. Too awful. And it was my fault. If I was stronger, maybe I could show Night that there was a better way to—

“Using your frustrations as power isn’t as hard as you think,” he told me.

“That’s what’s holding you back. You’re overthinking this.”

I’d almost forgotten that we were having a conversation through all this. *Focus, Bryn,* I thought.

“So your answer is just to stop thinking?”

“Yes. Let your wolf take control. She’s strong, just like you, and she knows how to fight.”

After telling Night that I trusted my wolf to protect me, here I was, stifling her all over again. My wolf wanted to be let loose. And she wanted to help. We weren’t attuned enough to be able to coexist in a battle without getting in each other’s way, so my only option was to take a deep breath and let her take control.

So I did just that, receding a bit into the background so she could lope forward. As she took over, the remaining six wolves came toward us at once. With three ferals for each of us, Night wouldn’t be able to help me if I got stuck, but if my wolf’s battle howl was any indication, she wasn’t worried about it. The ferals circled around us like sharks, like they were planning out how they wanted to take us out.

My wolf didn't want to wait. She lunged forward and bit the haunch of the closest feral until bone shifted and collapsed under her teeth. Another feral peeled away from the circling group to try and attack. With her teeth still embedded in the feral, my wolf shifted the feral's body into the way of the other's lunging attack. The feral yipped in pain as its own comrade bit through its shoulder.

Night made a sound that was something between a laugh and a pant.

"That's the spirit!"

He dove into the fray. The ferals pounced on us. My wolf let go of the wounded feral to face off with two others, one behind, one in front. The shifting of paws on the ground behind her told her that the one behind was the more immediate threat. She crouched low at the last second, turning the biting leap into a tackle that would roll both herself and her attacker into the path of the feral in front.

She dug her forepaws into the chest of the feral that had tackled her, using the momentum to kick it into the other. The two ferals became a pile of snapping teeth and flashing claws until they realized that they were attacking each other, not me. By that time, they were both scratched up pretty badly, and my wolf had the upper hand. She lowered her head, growling with her hackles raised.

Behind us, my wolf sensed that Night had just put down the last of the three ferals that had attacked him. He shifted his attention back to us, and ran to stand at our side. These last two ferals, understanding that the tables had turned, didn't sprint away. Instead, they put all they had into one last rush.

We surged forward and met them there. My wolf, mimicking the attack that had finished Troy, bent low and launched one of them up into the air. It bounced off the ceiling and crashed into the ground behind us. Night simply overpowered the wolf that ran toward him, putting his weight into shoving the feral until it fell onto its back. Then Night ripped its belly open.

Again, I turned away. I had commented on the fact that most of the women in the pack had never seen that much blood and death before, but here I was getting squeamish about my mate's methods. How could he stand being covered in so much blood? How could he keep going, knowing that he'd taken so many lives? I wished I could understand.

"I hope you're fucking ready," Night said, growling as he faced Harlon and Samson. The two had been standing off to the side of the room during the battle, watching instead of participating. Disgustingly, they each had a bottle

of beer in hand.

Though Night and my wolf had taken care of their ferals, they didn't seem at all upset now that they were all dead. In fact, if anything, Harlon and Samson looked disappointed that it had ended so quickly. This felt wrong. This felt like a trap.

My wolf, sensing the same thing, began to recede so I could take over. *"Night, wait. Something's not right."*

"Don't worry, Bryn. Even if there is a trap, even if they have an escape plan, they won't get by me. I can promise you that."

His words were comforting, but the longer the two wolves ahead of us stayed silent, the more eerie the situation felt.

I heard scraping noises behind me. I glanced over my shoulder to see Evan slipping from the hole that Night and I had found. I relaxed a little as I turned my attention back to Samson and Harlon. With Evan here, the three of us could face whatever trap was coming together—

The sharp retort of a gunshot filled the cavern. The sound was so loud, like a canon, and my ears immediately began to ring before they recovered enough that I could hear the muffled grunt of my mate ahead of me.

NIGHT

I had Harlon and Samson in my sights, and I was just a few fucking seconds away from ripping the two of them apart and painting the cave walls red with their blood. Before I could, I heard Evan entering the cave, recognized his scent. I didn't turn to him. Evan was loyal to the Wargs through and through, I didn't have anything to worry about—

The sound of a small bomb went off in the cave, making my ears ring. At the same time I felt a burst of heat on my right side. A second passed as I teetered on my paws, unsure of what the hell had happened. That second, even though it was filled with confusion, was so peaceful compared to the following seconds.

Pain roiled through my blood, setting my body on fire. The pain was white-hot, blinding, and so intense that my wolf, desperate to get away from it, forced me to shift into my human form. I stumbled forward and fell down onto my hands and knees, trembling all over. Through hazy, blurry vision, I saw my hands pressing to the cold ground, next to a steadily growing pool of crimson.

My thoughts raced, panic pulsing through me in time with my heartbeat. That was my blood. I'd been shot with something *bad*.

“*Night!*” Bryn rushed to my side, pressing her cold nose to me. Her presence would have been comforting under any other circumstances, but seeing her here, when I was in this condition, reminded me that she was in worse danger than I could have planned for.

“*Don't shift,*” I said, sensing that she was about to. “*I don't know what's going on, but you're a better fighter in your wolf form.*”

I forced myself to focus through the ringing in my ears and my spinning, blurry vision to watch Evan walk over to Samson and Harlon. The gun was in *his* hand?

“Howl, Bryn,” I urged her. “*Do it as loud as you can.*”

Without hesitation, she threw her head back and let out a long, piercing, gorgeous howl.

“Hey!” Evan’s voice cut right across her howl. “If you don’t want me to shoot your mate again, you’ll shut the fuck up.”

Her jaw snapped shut. *Damn.* I gritted my teeth as anguish rippled out from my side. *I hope someone heard her.* I clenched my hands into fists. My body wanted to give out, but I couldn’t lose consciousness. The second I did, we would both be dead.

“Evan!” I pushed my roar to rival his. I needed them to think I still had strength. “Why?”

The face of one of my closest friends curled into a terrible smirk. “Oh? You really want to know?”

Betrayal swarmed in my chest, almost as intense as the pain in my side. Evan had fucking shot me. “You better tell me,” I spat, “because I don’t fucking understand how a man who was loyal to the Wargs, who was working as a spy for us, for *me*, could do this.”

Evan chuckled.

“I’m not joking, you motherfucker.” I tried to push myself up, but I couldn’t keep standing. Blood gushed from my wound and I lost my balance. Bryn caught me with her head. She helped me down again. “Tell me, Evan!” I shouted.

“I wouldn’t expect someone like you to understand. You’re too blinded by your hatred for Gregor and Troy and now Samson and Harlon to see what’s really going on.” Evan crossed his arms, the gun held loosely and casually in his right hand. “Gregor saved my life, Night. I was only a teenager when you sent me into the Kings pack as a spy. I was all alone, I had no family and no protection. One wrong move, and I could have been treated like less than dirt, just like your pathetic mate. Gregor found out who I was. He took me under his wing. He saved my life when I was almost ripped apart by feral wolves.”

I glared at him. I hoped with everything I had that I would be able to make him pay for every year I had believed he was my friend.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” I demanded. “You agreed to do this for

the pack, but I told you that you could pull out at any time.”

“Because you didn’t care about me, Night,” he said with a shrug. “You didn’t care about any of us, really. The only thing on your mind was getting the Kings’ land, and you didn’t care what happened to any of us while you carried out your plans. All that talk about making things better for the Wargs was just to make you feel better about yourself. You didn’t want to be seen as anything like your dad, who abandoned the pack for his ambitions. Unfortunately for you, you turned out just like him. Only you lied to yourself about it.”

The words hit me one by one, each like a fresh bullet. “Gregor and Troy had no problem killing their own wolves to show that they were powerful. *They* were the ones who didn’t care about their pack, who killed or tortured if anyone so much as stood in their way. You’ve seen firsthand how sadistic they could be, Evan.”

“You’re right. But I didn’t just *see* it.”

His words chilled me.

Evan continued, “I used to be so weak before, but Gregor made me strong. He was like a father to me, the only real one I’d ever known.” He cleared his throat, blinking back tears. “Now that he’s gone, the true Alpha of the Kings is Troy. I’m not going to let you take the pack from my Alpha.”

Every step I’d made with Evan had led to this one, terrible moment. This was a betrayal that could never be erased or made up for or changed. Evan had thrown all of it away, for my monster of a father. And now, because I’d put my trust in him, I was going to lose my life, my mate, and my pack.

I couldn’t let it go down like that.

I tried to take a deep breath, but that was a bad idea. Expanding my chest put pressure on my side, bringing with it another wave of excruciating pain.

“Evan, come on,” I tried to reason with him. “Even if you believe that I didn’t care about you or the Wargs, you know that I never wanted you to be killed or to suffer. You’re a couple years younger than me, aren’t you? It’s obvious now that I failed you, that I pushed you into Gregor’s arms.”

Evan stared at me. I couldn’t tell if it was working, so I trudged ahead.

“Gregor brainwashed you. He exposed you to shit that no kid should have to see, and took advantage of your vulnerability. If you would just think this through again, you’d see that Bryn and I, the Wargs, we can all help you.”

His eyes narrowed, one of them twitching. “You didn’t give a damn about my mental health when you sent me in as a spy,” he snapped. “Where were

you when the Kings tortured me to break me, and forced me to kill to prove my loyalty to them? You never asked how I was. You only cared about the intel I could offer. You only wanted what doesn't belong to you."

I wasn't sure if it was the loss of blood or the desperation, but I tried to think back to those years. Had I really pushed him to this? Was all of this my own fault for being obsessed with the legacy my shithead father kept from me? I had never wanted Evan to suffer torture or brainwashing. I'd had no idea that things were so rough for him. He never told me. *Maybe I never asked.*

"Evan—"

Samson cut me off. "Why are you wasting your time talking to him?" he demanded. "Fucking kill him already."

"Right." Evan spun the gun on his finger before pointing it at me again. Bryn tensed next to me. She was either going to try to rush Evan or jump in front of me to block the bullet. Either of those options would result in her getting shot and killed. Fuck me, I couldn't let that happen.

"You think killing me will allow Troy to take over the Wargs," I called. "You think it'll give him the opportunity to control all the land, but you're wrong." I'd regained Evan's attention. "Even if I'm killed, Dom won't stop until he gets justice for me. And neither will my wolves. The Wargs would never allow anyone to take over our pack but Dominic."

Evan, Samson, and Harlon began to snicker.

Everyone always underestimated Dom. Everyone thought he was just a useful idiot or just extra muscle who'd been promoted to a position that he didn't deserve. But that was by design. That identity had been carefully crafted by Dom and myself. We wanted others to underestimate him, so that when I needed him to go all out, no one expected it, and no one could prepare for it.

I didn't know what my goal had been when I started saying all this, other than stalling for another few minutes, but I was glad that I'd brought it up. As my body grew weaker by the second, thinking of Dom taking over for me was a comfort. If these were my last moments, at least I'd go out knowing that my beta was strong enough to complete what Bryn and I had started here. Dom would be a powerful Alpha of the Wargs, who would protect him just as fiercely as they had protected me. And *he* would be the one to unite the packs.

"I have no problem killing anyone in my way, Night," Evan said, leveling

the gun at me, “starting with you and your whore of a mate—”

Before he could finish the sentence or fire off another shot, Bryn lunged forward.

BRYN

Staying quiet while Evan mocked and belittled my man drove me and my wolf fucking wild, but I knew I couldn't say anything. This was personal. He and Night had history that they were working through in live time right before my eyes. I thought about the conversation I'd had with Evan only the other day.

Part of my brain felt sure there was something I could have done to prevent things from getting so bad, but the rest of my brain shushed that voice. Right here, right now, my soulmate was losing a lot of blood. Each second brought him closer and closer to unconsciousness, but he was still fighting through it, trying to convince Evan to see the error of his ways.

My mate was fighting for both our lives, and I couldn't waste time thinking about what I could have done to help, not when we were minutes from death. Night couldn't fight, so I'd have to be the one to get us out of here.

Evan was the only one with a gun; Harlon and Samson were unarmed. If I could just find an opening, I could end this here.

"I have no problem killing anyone in my way, Night," Evan said, leveling the gun at Night, "starting with you and your whore of a mate—"

The moment I saw Evan's finger twitch over the trigger, my wolf surged forward to take control, and I let her without hesitation. She sprang into action, sprinting for Evan even before he finished speaking. Evan reflexively pulled the trigger, but the shot went wide. My wolf and I growled loud as we bit down on Evan's wrist, forcing him to drop the gun. Our scrambling back paws kicked it away, toward the center of the cave.

Evan cried out and kicked me hard in the chest. We let go, his blood spraying after us as we flew a few yards away. We hit the ground, but quickly hopped to our feet and lowered our head, hackles raised.

“Bryn,” Night called. He was lying on the ground, watching us. His voice was weaker than I remembered it being. “Go! Get out of here!”

“*Fuck that!*” we snapped. “*I can’t leave you here!*”

Evan shook out his arm, which still dripped with blood. “Samson, Harlon, get out of here. You both know your parts of this plan.”

“You got this, then?” Harlon asked.

“Yeah. I can take Night’s whore.”

They nodded and headed toward the back entrance of the cave. Evan shifted into his wolf form. It was blond like Dom’s, but his coloring was brassier. His wolf and mine circled each other, each looking for an opening. This was different from the fight with Troy. I had no element of surprise here. Evan had seen my fight with Troy, and I wouldn’t be able to use his underestimation of me to my advantage.

My wolf understood that just as well, which was why she wasn’t going for the first attack. Evan seemed happy to take that honor for himself. He sprinted forward and tackled us. Our fangs and claws scraped and bit and tore and ripped at each other.

“*Not bad for a bitch,*” he sent to me.

Hearing his voice in my brain, this close to me, made my skin crawl. “*Don’t you fucking speak to me, traitor!*”

We bit Evan on the shoulder and threw him into the cave wall. He yelped, but recovered quickly. He took hold of my back, throwing me into another spot of the cave wall. We shook our head and jumped at him again. Fur and blood flew in every direction. While my wolf fought, I tried to keep our mind off Night and the fact that he was bleeding out on the other side of the cave. I tried to force the fear of his death from my brain.

Despite how focused I tried to keep us through the fight, Evan got in a few lucky shots. He kicked us off him. As we hopped to our feet he slammed into us, and our right side hit a particularly jagged and craggy section of the cave wall. We crumbled to the floor, vision swimming. We tried to get up, but pain seared across our side, and we couldn’t keep our balance.

Evan gave a panting, barking laugh. He turned to Night, and we knew he was going in for the kill. We shook our head, hoping to regain some stability in our vision, and when we opened our eyes, we saw Evan towering over

Night. His fangs were out, and a stream of saliva poured from the sharpest ones onto the floor.

The seconds slowed to a trickle. I summoned all the energy I had left to force myself to my feet, and then I started to move before I fully realized what I was doing. Between one blink and the next, I found myself across the room, with Evan's throat between my teeth. Before I could stop myself, my jaws closed, and I felt his neck snap from the force of my bite.

Evan's body hit the floor, and I stared at it in horror. There was no mistaking that he was dead or that I had been the one to kill him. My mind raced, spiraling down and down again in a horrible loop of reliving that snapping moment. The sound of Night's pained groan forced me out of it.

He had already passed out, and there was so. Much. Blood. More than I would have thought he'd be able to hold. I threw back my head and gave a couple more piercing howls for help. Then I scanned the cave for anything I could use to slow the bleeding. All I found were Evan's clothes. I limped over to them, my entire body aching, and then limped back. Shifting to my human form, I fell to my hands and knees next to Night and shoved the cloth into the wound. Night didn't stir.

"Night, come on." I slapped his cheeks, but he said nothing. I pressed my ear to his chest and heard a heartbeat, but it was so faint, fluttering like the wings of a dying bird. I straightened, my body going cold.

"P-please, Night, don't go. You can't. We have so much that we have to do together. We have our lives to live. We...we..." Tears blurred my vision. "You said you'd always come back to me," I cried. "So you better come back to me now. If you don't...if-if you don't, I'll never forgive you!"

"*Bryn? Night?*" Dom's voice sounded from the opposite entrance to the cave than the one we entered.

"Dominic! In here!" I called back. "Night's hurt! He's not responding!"

A group of Wargs sprinted inside. The moment Dom saw me, he shifted to his human form and jogged to my side. He helped me apply pressure to Night's wound when he saw how badly I was shaking. With a quick glance around, he took in the bodies of the feral wolves, the gun, and the brassy-blond wolf lying dead near me.

"Bryn, what happened?"

"Evan betrayed us," I said. "He tried to kill Night, so I k-ki—" I couldn't say it. I couldn't give voice to the horrible thing I'd done to save my mate. "He's dead now, but Samson and Harlon are gone. They went out the way

you came in.”

Dom cursed under his breath. More wolves flooded into the cave and started to move Night out of there. They would want to get him to the infirmary as quickly as fucking possible. In the meantime, another wolf brought me a blanket to drape over my shoulders, and Dom helped me to my feet.

As soon as we reached the Alpha cabin, Dom and Vince laid Night across the bed and I made a beeline for the closet. I pulled on the thickest robe I could find and wrapped myself tightly in it. As I tied the sash closed, I turned to see how I could help. The clothes I'd used to staunch the blood were soaked through.

I threw open the dresser drawers until I found t-shirts. I grabbed them in handfuls and gave them to Dom. He looked thankful as I took them.

“Vince, get Doc,” he said.

“R-right. I'll bring him right back.” Vince shifted back into his wolf form and dashed down the stairs.

“Dom,” I began, my voice hoarse, “how is he?”

“I can't tell,” Dom said. He had switched out the bloody scraps of clothes for linens. “I've never seen an injury like this. And this blood, I don't know why his wound isn't closing.”

Fear was an ice pick stabbing repeatedly into my chest as I looked at Night. His breathing was shallow and raspy, his face waxy with perspiration. The sight of my strong, handsome mate so weak and in so much pain shook me more than the entire rest of the night had. A normal bullet shouldn't have been able to do this to him. Had it hit something vital? Was it killing him?

For a second, my mind returned to that moment in the cave, when I had my jaws locked around Evan's neck and the taste of blood in my mouth. I tried to shake myself out of it. I needed to be here for my mate.

Dr. Stan arrived seconds later. There were bags under his eyes, and he looked about as pale as the night's patients, but he wasted no time getting to his Alpha. I stood at the foot of the bed and watched him crouch at Night's side. He took a quick whiff of the wound, and his lips pulled away from his teeth.

“Get me a boning or paring knife,” he said to the room. “Now.”

He hadn't specified who, but after the cooking I'd done in that huge kitchen, I was the one who would be the most efficient at grabbing it. I dashed down the stairs, slipping a little on unsteady legs as I made my way to

the kitchen. When I returned, Night's face was contorted with pain. His hands gripped the sheets of the bed, smearing them with blood.

"Please, Bryn," Dr. Stan said, "the knife." He held out his hand for it.

I snapped out of my shock. With a trembling hand, I gave him the knife. He pushed Night onto his side, exposing his back. With a deft move, the doctor shoved the knife into Night's back. Night jerked, his eyes snapping open.

"Hold him!" Dr. Stan snapped.

Dom took Night's shoulder, helping to keep him steady as the doctor worked.

My wolf shrieked and banged around in my mind, eager to go to our mate. Her intent was clear—if she could get the doctor away from Night, he'd hurt less. I clenched my hands and kept her at bay. When it came to fighting, I would always defer to her, but when it came to matters of logic and reason, I had to deal with it on my own. Unfortunately, I couldn't recede into unconsciousness or let my wolf take over in this situation. The moment I did, she'd get in Dr. Stan's way.

"Bryn," Night's voice was a breathy rasp.

I was at his side then. Dom stepped back to let me kneel at his side. I took my mate's hand and touched his cheek. The moment our skin made contact, his jerking and trembling began to subside.

"I'm here, love," I whispered, squeezing his hand. "I'm here."

He looked at me, his eyes narrowing as he tried to focus on my face. I ran the pad of my thumb over his bushy eyebrows.

"I'm here," I said again, kissing his hands. "I'm not going anywhere."

A ghost of a smile touched his lips. Soon, his eyes began to slip shut, and his body calmed. Dr. Stan breathed a sigh of relief and continued to work. Other than a faint twitching of his eye, Night didn't try to resist treatment again.

BRYN

Dr. Stan breathed a sigh of relief as he stepped back. His hands were slick with Night's blood, and one of them held a needle and remnants of the thread used to sew up Night's wound. I ran my hand through my mate's hair, damp with sweat. He seemed much, much calmer now. He hadn't stirred once when Dr. Stan was stitching him up; in fact, he seemed to be sleeping.

"Is he going to be okay, Doc?" Dom asked.

"Yes," the doctor dabbed at his sweaty forehead with a t-shirt that wasn't stained with blood, "now that this thing is out of him." He wiped his hands on that same t-shirt and then held something in his hand. I stood to see what it was. A bloody bullet, the tip of it bent in on itself, sat in his palm.

Dom took a sharp breath in through his teeth. "Is that thing made of silver?"

Dr. Stan nodded.

My eyes widened. It made me sick all over again to think that my mate had been hit with something so poisonous. My wolf began to growl, but there was nothing to aim our rage at. Evan was dead. *And I was the one who did it.*

"Will there be any long-term effects?" I asked.

"He shouldn't shift for at least a week, and during that time, he'll be weaker than he's used to."

My eyes widened. "But wouldn't shifting make him heal faster?"

"Under normal circumstances, yes, but silver is a wolf's greatest weakness. When he was hit with it, his wolf receded inside him. The silver is in Alpha Night's blood, and until it's run its course, he'll need to take it as

easy as possible.”

“I’ve never heard of that before.”

“You wouldn’t have. Alphas aren’t open about their weaknesses for this reason. Centuries ago, challengers would dip their claws in silver or otherwise hide silver on their bodies to better their odds of winning. It wasn’t against the rules back then, and these days, Alphas keep the information under wraps. It’s important for you to know that, too, now that you’re an Alpha, Bryn.”

I resisted the urge to wince. Like Night and all other Alphas before me, I would begin my rule with blood on my hands. “Yeah. I guess you’re right. Is there anything I can do to help Night more?”

He shook his head. “I’m sorry, but no. His body needs to deal with this on its own.”

“I understand. Thank you, Dr. Stan.”

He nodded with a small smile, and then left. Dom and I were left alone with the sleeping Night. I sat on the bed beside him and touched his hair, his thick locks curled around my fingers.

“I’ll have wolves stationed around the cabin,” Dom said. “I have to get back to the fight. I imagine you’ve got things covered here?”

I nodded. It was hard not to feel awful for being away from my people, but even the idea of being more than a few feet away from Night made my wolf whine and gnash her teeth. I felt the same. I didn’t want to leave him alone while he was so vulnerable.

“I’ll check back in soon.”

“Okay. Be careful, Dom.”

He gave me a half smile. “Always.”

As Dom headed out, I continued to pet Night in his sleep, watching the occasional twitch of an eyelid or the corner of his mouth. If he so much as gasped in his sleep, I would be there to smooth his brow and soothe his worries.

HOURS LATER, after a night of fitful, dreamless sleep, I rolled out of bed. Night was still lying on his side. Bandages were still stuck to either end of the bullet wound and spots of blood had seeped through while he slept. I’d need to change them, but first I needed to wash off my own grime and sweat and blood.

I climbed into the shower, made the water as hot as possible, and stepped in. It burned, but I didn't turn down the temperature. It needed to be boiling if I wanted to scrub my skin free of the memory of what I'd done. The ripple that went through me as Evan's bones snapped in my jaws, the flash of heat as his blood hit my tongue.

I shivered in spite of the temperature and scrubbed myself almost raw.

When I finally felt clean, I stepped out. My skin was bright red, but I still felt dirty. In the mirror, I could see no trace of the wounds I'd sustained during the fight, and there was no evidence of the life I'd stolen. I brushed my teeth until I spat blood with the toothpaste in the sink, and then I brushed more. It had been only hours since I killed Evan. Through the window in the bathroom, I saw that the sun had only just begun to rise. It was a blessing that I hadn't had any nightmares last night, but I was sure that they would come to haunt me soon enough.

There was a knock on the front door. I spat more red-stained toothpaste into the sink, pulled on another robe, and jogged downstairs to answer. Already, my skin had healed from the abuse I'd put it through.

Dom was there when I answered the door. "Hey, how are you holding up?" he asked.

I couldn't give voice to the emotions that plumed like thick smoke in my mind, so I said nothing.

Dom, correctly interpreting my silence, gave me a sad smile and moved on to the next topic. "The ferals finally retreated."

"That's great news. What were our casualties?"

"Dozens are injured, and about ten of those injured are in critical condition. As for deaths, we lost five Wargs and twenty-five Kings."

I should have been braced for the news, but I wasn't. Last night, I'd seen fifteen total dead, but that number had now doubled. I knew that in the grand scheme of things, these numbers were only a fraction of the populations of either pack, and I knew that things could have gone a lot worse. But that didn't make me feel less guilty. It was a win, but to me, losing even one life was a huge loss. How could I not feel responsible? I'd failed my pack because I hadn't been prepared for this to happen. I hadn't even been able to help in battle because I wasn't trained for it.

If you had been trained, you wouldn't have had to kill Evan. That cruel voice slithered into my thoughts and left me feeling raw and restless. *I need to learn how to fight. ASAP.* I refused to let this happen again. I owed it to my

people. Even when I was no longer Alpha, I would still be the Den Mother, and that carried almost as much responsibility.

“I heard that the council wants to speak with you when you’re available,” Dom said.

“Of course they do.” As much as I wanted to spend the day watching over Night, I couldn’t exactly take the day off. We’d just had a war. “Did they mention a time?”

“Around three.”

“I can make that work.”

“Good. Us Wargs will be there too, so you won’t be alone.”

“I’m glad.” My smile felt a bit more genuine. “I’ll have friends there.”

The rest of the conversation was brief. Dom let me know that Violet, Tavi, and my mother weren’t among those injured, and then he left to help deal with the injured. I returned to the bedroom.

Night had still been snoring when I left to answer the door, but as I entered the bedroom I found him not only awake, but trying to sit up. I rushed to his side.

“Wait, wait.” I adjusted the pillows behind him and helped him lean back against them. “Be careful, you’re still injured.”

“Yeah, I feel like shit.” His voice was raspy. “What happened?”

“You were shot with a silver bullet. By Evan.”

As I spoke, I watched confusion change to surprise on his handsome face. The memories slowly came back to him until his emerald eyes darkened with sorrow. I wished I didn’t have to remind him.

“I’m so sorry, Bryn.”

Those four words clutched at my heart and made my eyes sting with tears. “Wh-why would *you* be sorry?”

He touched my face and caressed my cheek. “I never wanted to put you in the position of having to take a life, especially someone that we knew.”

His touch sent me over the edge, and I couldn’t stop the tears. “He was going to *kill* you,” I hiccupped. “And before I could stop myself or think things through, I had him, and I-I—”

Night pulled me close, tucking my head under his chin. I sobbed into his chest, feeling the weight of everything we’d endured crashing down on me.

Night kissed the top of my head while I cried. “It’s not your fault, Bryn. It’s not.”

My hands clenched in the sheets at either side of him. The worst part of

this was that if I had to choose between taking a life and saving Night's, I knew I would always, *always* choose Night without hesitation. It was a side of myself I hadn't known I'd need to address.

My mind went back to the fight with Troy, when I'd had the ability to kill him. I'd narrowly stopped myself. After all those days of pain and the constant beatings, I'd almost let my rage push me over the edge. And now, I'd taken that step with Evan.

My sobs became deep, shuddering breaths, and my tears dried. As I calmed, Night started to tell me about his first kill.

"I was sixteen when I challenged the Alpha of the Wargs. Peter was awful. He didn't care about our land or his people, and he let the Kings take everything from us. I knew the Wargs deserved more, so I fought for it. I killed him for it."

As he spoke, he rubbed my back in soothing up and down motions. "Everyone told me how proud of me they were. They said how grateful they were that I was bringing in a newer, more successful era. I spent months preparing for the fight because I knew I'd have to go through wolves that were bigger and stronger than I was. I thought I could live with taking a life, but I felt dead inside. Mom told me I was allowed some time for grief and regret, but that mourning period changed nothing in my life. I still had to live with my decision, and even though she supported me, I bore that responsibility alone."

He touched my chin, forcing me to look up at him. "You will have to live with your decision, too. It won't be easy, and I'm sure it'll be even more difficult because you're the most gentle woman I've ever met." He pushed my hair behind my ear. "Know that I believe in you, and there isn't a wolf worth his weight in fur who wouldn't make the same choice you made for your mate."

"I would do it again," I murmured. "I love you, Night."

"I know you would." He kissed me gently. "I love you, too. I hate that you had to do something that was so outside your morals for me, when I'm supposed to be the one protecting you."

"You're worth it." The memory of what I'd done was still fresh in my mind, but listening to Night talk about his past made me feel a bit better. It made me feel less alone.

"It doesn't matter what time of day or what I'm doing," he said, "if you need to talk about this, I'll always be available to you." He kissed me again.

“You’re so strong, Bryn, and so smart. You’re not a monster, you’re an Alpha. You’re fierce and wonderful and you care deeply about your people.”

“Thank you, Night.” I almost started crying again, but managed to hold it together. This time, I initiated the kiss. I’d intended for it to be tender and sweet like the others before it, but Night pulled me closer and closer until I was pressed flush against him. His hands snaked under my robe to touch my bare skin.

I shivered and pulled back. “Night, no,” I said, though I was panting, though I wanted him, though I saw the sizable tent he pitched beneath the covers. “You’re still hurt.”

He smirked. “So what?” He met my lips again, his teeth catching my bottom lip.

I pulled back again, my face hot, my body even hotter. Still, I tried to stay firm. “Night Shepherd. Dr. Stan said you can’t do anything strenuous. You have to take it easy because—and I can’t believe I have to remind you of this—you were shot with a *silver* bullet.”

His smirk became a wolfish grin. “So caring, so considerate, even when I can smell the perfume of your arousal.” His hand slipped lower, his finger stroking up and down my slit. “And you’re already dripping wet.”

“N-Night...” Despite my best efforts, his name came out like a moan rather than a reprimand. “You should be resting...”

“So help me rest.” He circled around and around my clit until I was shivering and biting my lip. His eyes were bright with hunger. “I promise I won’t move.”

I groaned even as I straddled him. “I can’t believe I let you talk me into this.”

“Can’t you?”

I kissed him, just to wipe that sexy smirk off his lips, and pushed away the covers so his erection could stand free. I let my tongue run along his bottom lip as I positioned him at my entrance. I swallowed his growl as I teased him, stroking the tip of his penis back and forth, getting him slick with my lust. I broke the kiss with a giggle that turned into a moan as I finally let him inside me.

“Mm, Bryn...” he moaned. He pulled the sash that held my robe closed and watched me take in every inch of him. “Fuck, you’re so beautiful.”

His hands slipped around my waist as I began to gently ride him. I wrapped my arms around his neck, peppering him in kisses, trailing down to

the spot where I'd bitten him. I didn't want to excite him too much, as much as he filled my body with tingling pleasure, but I couldn't resist licking him there and tasting the salt of his skin. He'd already worked me up before I started riding him, and I knew it wouldn't take much to send me over that sweet edge.

His breaths came in quick pants, his fingers pressing more firmly into my waist. The robe slipped down my shoulders, raising goosebumps down my arms. Though I was going slow and easy, he filled me up just right. On each bounce, I felt him pressing against that special spot, sending me closer and closer to my peak.

One of his hands caressed up my back to bury into my hair. "I love you," he murmured.

"I-I love you t—ohh..." My orgasm eased over me, like a warm bubble bath. It seeped into my muscles, relaxing every tense or aching inch. My sweet, shivering bliss was punctuated by Night's climax. He hissed his pleasure, filling me with his hot cum.

"Mate," I whispered, pressing my forehead to his.

"Mate," he replied, and held me close.

BRYN

Later that day, Night, ignoring Dr. Stan's advice again, came with me to the council meeting. He could get around pretty well, but I knew he was in pain. Every time he had to step over something, he clenched his jaw. It was a subtle cue but one I picked up on easily. I carefully wrapped my arm around his waist as we made our way slowly to the meeting room.

As we walked, I caught him up on the results of last night's attack.

"I hate that we suffered so many casualties," he said. "I hate that we were all so unprepared for something like this."

"I know. I'm hoping this meeting will help us nail down what exactly happened."

"It better. Otherwise it'll be a goddamn waste of time."

We were the last to enter, and as such, we drew the attention of everyone in attendance. If there were any real discussion going on, it would have gone silent. Dom, Tavi, Violet, and my mom were there already, as were the Elders of both packs, the council, and several fighters from both packs.

Dom took over for me at Night's side. He was insistent that he was fine and could walk on his own, but Dom ignored him, guiding Night toward his own vacant chair. They hadn't expected Night to attend, so there would otherwise have only been a chair for me.

One of the Kings' fighters, a man who was several decades older than Night, stood and made a beeline for Night and Dom. Dom held out his hand to stop the man, and he paused. Now this fighter had everyone's attention.

"What do you need?" Night asked.

"I—" His hands clenched at his sides. "My name is Theodore. The young

wolf you saved last night is my son. He told me that if not for you, he'd be dead. I just wanted to thank you for that, Alpha Shepherd." He unclenched his hand and offered it.

Such a display of gratitude would have made a lesser Alpha preen or blush, but Night did neither. Instead, he took the man's hand and shook.

"I appreciate this," he said, "but it's not necessary. I will always protect the wolves who fight by my side."

The man's gruff expression lightened somewhat as an almost-smile touched his lips. He said nothing, but some sort of understanding seemed to pass between him and Night. I smiled to myself and sat in the seat that Tavi had saved me.

I cleared my throat, pulling the attention of the room again. "What have we got so far?"

One of the Kings' sentinels stood. "Our number of deaths hasn't gone up. We have been able to give aid to those who were injured and keep them alive. About a third of our compound has suffered devastating damage, with a little less than half of it sustaining damage that can be repaired."

It was such a relief to hear that we'd had no further casualties. "What are we doing with the wolves who lost their homes?"

"They're being integrated into other cabins for now, but it'll be tight until we get some major repairs underway."

This struck me as a perfect opportunity to begin merging the two packs, and it seemed Night's thoughts were in the same place.

"Any Kings families in need of shelter are more than welcome to stay on our land," he said. "We don't have a ton of space available, but between our territories, I'm sure we can work something out."

The sentinel blinked. That had clearly been the last thing he'd expected to hear, but he quickly snapped out of it. "I'll let them know...and, er, thank you." He sat.

"So, what exactly caused this to happen?" I asked.

Elder Sage spoke up. "We don't know what triggered this, or how Samson and Harlon were able to get the ferals to listen en masse. This has never happened before."

Elder Patrice added, "Ferals are wild and fearful; they're supposed to steer clear of the attention of large packs. Some act like hunters of opportunity because they usually aren't able to compete with someone in a pack."

“You said ‘some.’”

She nodded. “We are pack animals, which means that ferals don’t take to their isolation well. They rely on their wolves more and more until some of them even forget they can shift into human forms. At that point, they go totally wild.”

Elder Forsythe stood. “I might as well say this to clear the air. Most of the wolves that have been banished were rightfully punished; however, some were banished because Gregor believed them to be a threat to his rule. They were wolves who demanded a better life for their families and who didn’t believe it was right to capture, torture, or kill any wolf found trespassing on their land.”

“So,” I said, “you’re saying that not all of the ferals are crazy. Some of them would be in their faculties.”

“That’s right.”

I frowned. “So some of these wolves have a massive grudge against us because Gregor didn’t like what they had to say.” *Pretty pathetic, if you ask me.* But I wouldn’t say that. Not here. “Is there a way to help ferals recover so they can lead healthy lives?”

“That, to my knowledge, has never been done.”

“It can’t be that complicated, right?” Night asked. He sat at my left and had his arms crossed. “We just need to train them to remember their human sides. I’m not saying it’ll be easy. They’ll be hard to corral, and it’ll be tough convincing them to reach out to their human and give back control. But it should be possible.”

“I think we should give it a try,” I said. It was up to us to right the wrongs that had been done to them. Some ferals were criminals, but without hearing their stories, we would never know who deserved to be there and who didn’t.

“I don’t see why we would waste time on this,” Dana Whelk said. She looked right at me as she spoke. She had been glaring at me throughout the meeting. “It would take far less time and resources to simply kill the ferals. Then the threat would be gone.”

My eyes narrowed, but I was spared having to respond by an unlikely speaker.

“With all due respect, ma’am,” Theodore said, “we have no idea where the ferals are hiding. Killing all of them will be grueling, hard work that no one will want to do.”

She looked at him like he wasn’t fit to lick the bottom of her foot. “That’s

what we have fighters and warriors for,” she retorted. “You’re supposed to do the work that the rest of us don’t want to do. Or is a small gesture from the Wargs’ Alpha all it takes to make you forget that?”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “My son’s life is a small gesture to you?”

“No. That’s enough,” I said. “The infighting is unnecessary. We were *all* attacked, so we need to come up with a solution that helps everyone.” I turned my gaze to Dana. “We’ve seen the kind of damage that an iron fist can do, Dana. I’m sure everyone here can point out the flaws in Gregor and Troy’s leadership. It’s time we try something more compassionate.” I felt Night’s knee bump mine, a bit of encouragement that gave me a bit of courage as I went on, “If nothing else, helping the ferals would probably help us figure out what the hell happened last night.”

Elder Queene nodded. “It’s something we can try and work out, should a feral appear again.”

“Great. Now we can discuss the damage done to the compound. What areas were most affected?”

Dom stood. “I can help answer that.” He nodded to Frankie, who stood against the wall of the room. She and Tyrell approached the table and laid out a map of the Kings pack territory. It was marked with red ink. “Most of the damage was done at the eastern border because that was where the attack started.” He pointed to the area of the map with the most red. “The infirmary was largely untouched aside from the busted front door. But cabins and buildings nearby were trashed.”

He moved his finger closer to the center of the compound. The red marks were near where we’d started to treat the injured wolves. “There was also quite a bit of damage done in this area. Most of these homes were torched and ransacked.”

The red marks were scattered throughout the map according to how successful the siege at each corner of the border was, but the northwest section of the map was largely unaffected. I pointed to it, interrupting the rest of Dom’s report.

“What about this area?” I asked. “It’s completely untouched.”

Night brushed behind me to get a better look at the map, and I felt the anger rumble in his chest. I didn’t understand why at first. In that direction was the dining hall and the schoolhouse, and...

“Isn’t that where the holding facility is?” Night asked. “Where Troy is?”

Realization hit Tavi, Dom, and I at the same time. “Night, you don’t

think...?”

Night’s growl became more pronounced, and he turned to leave. I got up, too, my chair squeaking across the floor, but he was already out the door.

“What?” Elder Sage demanded. “What is it?”

“Troy is there,” Tavi snapped. I hadn’t expected her to speak, but as she said those words, her voice held the same amount of tension that was visible in Night’s shoulders. “Troy might be behind *all* of this.”

Tavi, Dom, and I left behind shocked murmurs as we rushed to catch up with Night. He was still in pain, but he led the way as we stormed past leveled buildings and torched wood to get to the holding facility. When we arrived, we found no one guarding the front door. The prisoners inside were howling for food, demanding us to let them out before they starved to death.

Night ignored them all as he stomped up to Troy’s cell, which, like the door, was unguarded. We’d need to determine whether the missing guards were dead or if they had been in on the plan. The cell was unlocked. That was enough to confirm our worst fears, but Night threw open the door anyway.

My hands clenched at my sides, nails digging into my palms. The cell was empty, and aside from the lingering stench of Troy, there was no trace that it had ever been used at all.

All I could say was, “Fuck.”

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FIGHTING FOR THE PACK

MATED TO THE NIGHT: BOOK 2

Lindsey Devin

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