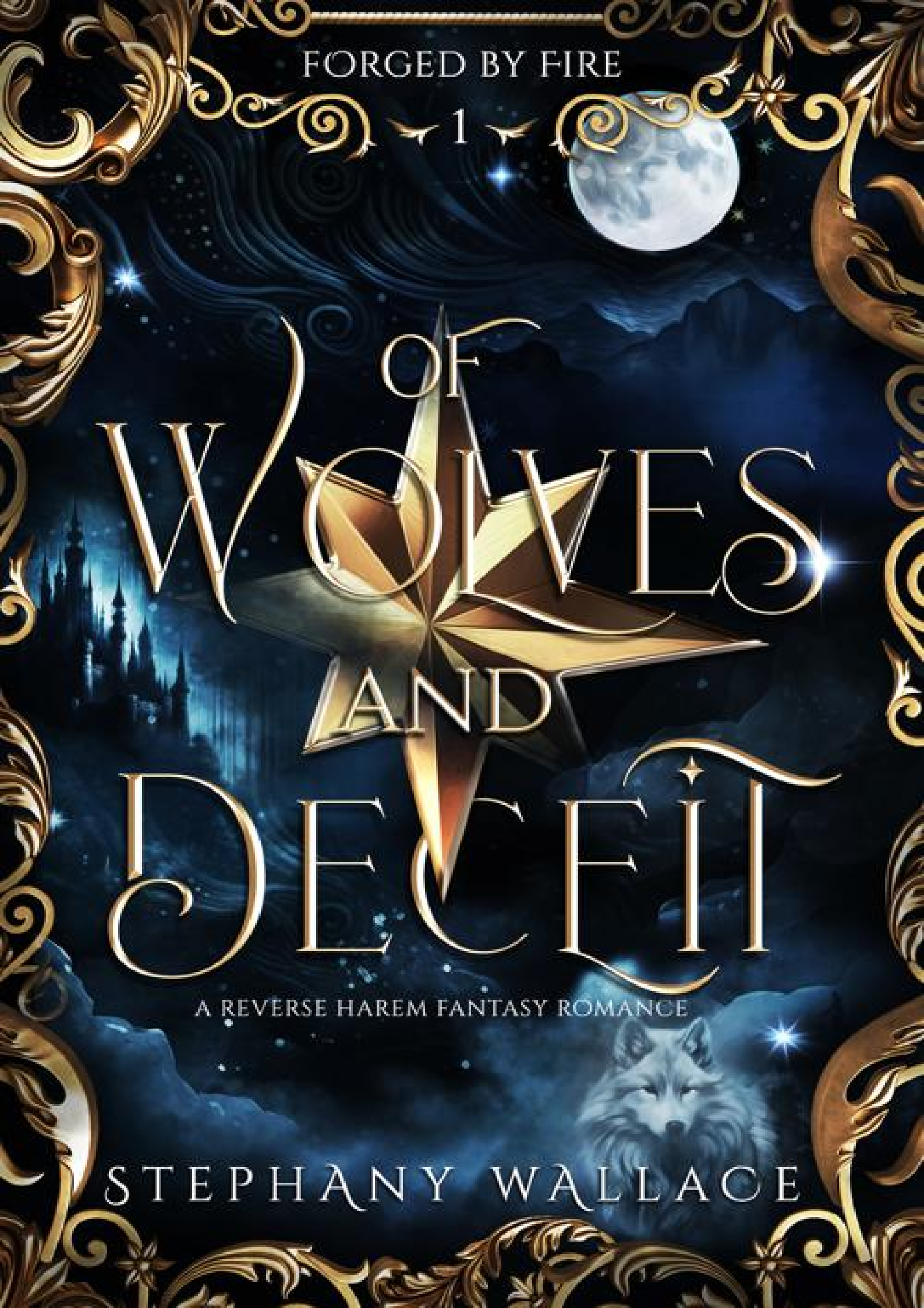


FORGED BY FIRE


1



WOLVES  
AND  
DECEIT

A REVERSE HAREM FANTASY ROMANCE

STEPHANY WALLACE

The book cover features a central illustration of a white wolf standing in a dark, enchanted forest. The wolf is the focal point, looking slightly to the left. The background is a vibrant, ethereal landscape with purple and blue hues, suggesting a magical or otherworldly setting. The title 'OF WOLVES AND DECEIT' is written in a large, elegant, white serif font, with 'OF' and 'AND' in smaller letters. Below the title, the subtitle 'A REVERSE HAREM FANTASY ROMANCE' is written in a smaller, simpler font. At the bottom, the text 'FORGED BY FIRE SERIES BOOK 1' is followed by a decorative flourish and the author's name 'STEPHANY WALLACE' in a large, white serif font.

OF  
WOLVES  
AND  
DECEIT

A REVERSE HAREM FANTASY ROMANCE

FORGED BY FIRE SERIES BOOK 1

STEPHANY WALLACE



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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this story to anyone who is still trying to find their way in this world, to discover their true purpose, or to make their dreams come true.

Your value is greater than anything you can see right now. I know it's hard, but keep going, your journey is not over yet.

---

*“What you are able or unable to achieve right now, doesn't stop what you are destined to become...”*

— Vanessa



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I love you all.

I'd like to thank Amanda Kremin for selflessly helping me proofread this book at the very last minute, giving me her honest opinion on my work, and above all, for helping me get out of my head and trust the artistic beauty of my story. Thank you, sweetie, I know I've said it A LOT, but I am truly appreciative of you and your help. You are AWESOME!

I want to thank my mom, Zobeida, for always reading my books, even the crazy spicy scenes, and being excited about my stories. Especially, for always asking "Is the book ready yet?" after reading the first chapter lol.

I love you, Mom.

And last but not least, I want to thank myself for believing in this crazy journey, giving it everything I have, even writing through the pain of an injured hand, but pushing through it all when it seemed impossible or overwhelming to finish.

I love me so much. ;)



## PROLOGUE

*Wolves and Vampires never mix...*

*Unless they are ready to rip each other apart.*

---

NATASHA

*H*umans say there is something magical about the Crystal Glow Mountains in Colorado... or so I've been told.

*They are right.*

*It's us. The Shadow Born Pack. An ancient race of Wolf Shifters born of the purest Witch magic, and a mystical crystal only found here. From the shadows, we protect humans from creatures they believe to only exist in their darkest nightmares.*

*Vampires.*

*The venomous monsters are real—deformed, cursed creatures deprived of thought, logic, or feeling. Driven only by their insatiable hunger for blood, they hunt humans each night, the only time they are safe from incineration under the power of sunlight. It's why we were created, to end their killing and blood enslaving of the human race.*

*Our hunters go out each night to the world below the mountain, using the cloak of darkness to track and kill those vile beasts, and soon, I will be one of them.*

# I

NATASHA

Gusts of excitement fluttered through the *Shadow Born* village, as preparations for the long-awaited *fire ceremony* began. The swirling joy mixed with the billows of fog crawling along the earth, and the cool air of the morning atop the *Crystal Glow Mountains*.

A small chill ran down my spine as the breeze swept me in a soothing caress, not because I was cold—that was virtually impossible for me—but because my senses awoke with the delightful smells of pine trees and spice cones. An indulging smile curved my lips when I stopped on the edge of the cliff, glancing down at the orange, red, and yellow leaves that painted the mountain skirt like a canvas, while soft white snow adorned the surrounding peaks.

I loved living here. So close to the clouds that humans could only ever dream of it, yet close enough to the city to make sure they were all safe. We, however, fit perfectly in this beautiful forest we called home. Because we were special...

Supernaturals. Protectors. Wolf Shifters.

“Good morning, Natasha!”

“Morning, Greta!” Waving at the sweet, older woman and her three daughters—Willa, Frederica, and Ilsa—I resumed my way back to the house after taking a hot shower in the communal bathroom.

Sure, we were Wolf Shifters, but we weren't animals. Though we lived at the top of the mountain, our village was still equipped with some of the advantages of the modern, human world... even if we weren't a part of it or allowed to visit.

Greta and her daughters, with the rest of the pack's breeders, hung white and golden-colored lanterns from the trees along the large clearing, arranging strings of white orchids all around the area designated for the ancient and sacred event.

"Are you excited to finally complete the fire trial?" Willa's voice carried the same feeling of happiness everyone shared, its wisps seeping into my pores with each step.

"More than you know..." My gaze traveled over the forest beneath us, extending to the bustling city beyond the ever-changing trees—where humans lived. Both contentment and nostalgia filled my being. It was a sight that had fed my soul each day since I could remember, and I didn't think I could ever get tired of it. Most of all, I couldn't wait to be part of that world too.

*Two more days...*

An extra kick of exhilaration rushed through my being, tying my stomach in knots. This year, the *fire ceremony* just so happened to fall on the day of my nineteenth birthday... The day my life would finally change.

My steps suddenly faltered when kids ran across my path, a little one bumping against my knee in his rush to keep up with the older ones. "Oh! Careful there, little cub."

Lifting the three-year-old boy in my arms, I kissed his chubby cheek and set him down again to join his friends. Our kids weren't really wolf cubs since our race required ancient fire magic to fully acquire our mystical wolf forms, and they were too small to be put through the excruciating experience of trying to shift without that magic, but they loved it when I called them cubs.



Grinning widely with the compliment, he waved me goodbye and ran away, eliciting a chuckle from me before I resumed my pace.

Once I entered our house, I hung the wet towel on the back of the chair, before closing the curtains for privacy. The “house” was a tiny cabin—only big enough for a kitchenette, a small table with two chairs, a couple of twin-size beds, a closet, and a desk—but Isis and I didn’t need anything more.

I knelt in front of Isis’ bed, pulled out the suitcase hidden underneath it, and took out the phone she kept stashed inside it. A smile instantly captured my lips seeing the hundreds and hundreds of comment notifications on the screen, and the exhilaration they stirred joined the glee already rushing widely through me.

The purple and blue extensions Isis had gifted me on my last birthday were out next, so I sat in front of the small mirror on the desk, placing them along the strands of my all-white hair—just like she taught me. They looked so freaking awesome that I wished for the millionth time they were real.

Our Alpha, however, would probably strangle me with his bare hands if they were. The fur of a Wolf Shifter was the most sacred thing we had, and it should *never* be dyed or changed in any way.

Not that it mattered, I doubted my unusual strands could be dyed even if I was allowed to try... And my fur was already “damaged” enough.

Sadness began to tinge my emotions as I glanced at myself in the mirror. The jagged mark that tainted my childhood stared back at me, eliciting a painful reminder I hadn’t been able to escape for years.

Swiftly pushing it all away, I stood, taking off my plain, linen dress and changing into one of the pretty outfits Isis’ left in the suitcase for me. My life was about to begin, and *nothing* was going to ruin the happiness growing inside me...

Once I fully shifted with the mystical fire, I would become who I was always meant to be. A magical and powerful she-

wolf warrior. Uncle Arnoldt—sorry, our Alpha—would welcome me into his vampire hunting pack, and I’d finally step outside this beautiful place I called home.

I would taste freedom...

For so long, I had prepared for this. So long I’d waited to be part of the Hunters. To enter the human world, mingle with them, and protect them like our shifter race was created to do.

*Two more days. Only two more...*

I opened the closet and reached for the false wall at the back, taking out my most precious treasure—one of my makeup bins. Once I was ready, I set up the phone to record as Isis always did and hit start.

“Hello, makeup queens! It’s your bestie, Selena, with my weekly report of the new products you shouldn’t miss. I’ll also be answering all your questions from last week, and most of all, satisfying your requests for awesome new looks. Let’s begin!”

Briefly checking the curtains yet again, to make sure I got enough natural light but still hid my shenanigans from the rest of the unapproving pack, I grabbed the angled brush and luxurious set before me.

“Today we are putting to the test the brand-new palette from *Heavenly Beauty*, the *Ninth Cloud Set*. As usual, I already got my face prepped with all my skincare and full coverage foundation. If you want to know what products I used, check the description below for the full list. Alright, makeup queens, the first thing I love about this palette is that it’s a nine-in-one set. It has a cream foundation, contour, bronzer, four eyeshadows, and of course, a beautiful blush and highlighter combination. It also comes in a huge range of skin tones, so no one is left behind. These are the ones that match my skin.”

Tilting the palette in my hand toward the phone’s camera, I did my best to show the gradients and began applying the contour.

“Wow, I wish you could feel how luxurious these are. They glide like silk over my skin!” I applied the blush next, then shifted my face in front of the camera to show the shimmering glow it provided. “Dreamy. Now, per your requests, today we’ll be creating an evening Fall look, for anyone who wants to go out but wants something a little different. Also, @Eyra\_Vegasgirl asked in the comments if I could find an affordable dupe for the red Dior lipstick I showcased last week, and the answer is, of course! I know many of my queens are on a budget, so I found you the perfect dupe and it comes in so many options!”

Lifting the range of colors for the camera to capture, I smiled.

“Aren’t these just absolutely gor—”

“The Hunters are back!”

“The Hunters are finally here!”

Each shout reverberated through the air like thunder, slipping into the house along with the sounds of doors swinging wide open and slamming closed all around the village—mates, breeders, and mothers rushing out to greet them.

*Ryker!*

My heart stammered into a fierce pounding, and I jumped off my chair, forgetting things I should *never* forget. All the lipsticks dropped from my hands, crashing to the floor one by one like bells. I, too, swung the door open, running outside.

It had been a week since my uncle, the *Shadow Born* Alpha, and his hunters left to track and kill Vampires. Their outings usually took them away from us for only one night, maybe two days, three at most, so the entire pack was anxious. This was the first time it took them so long to come home, which meant the threat they’d encountered had been greater than anything they’d expected. Everyone knew the Hunters were the most powerful among us, yet even though I tried my best not to dwell on it, part of me was still scared for my future mate.

Strong arms caught me the moment I rushed out of the cabin, wrapping around me in a possessive embrace, and bringing with them the impossible heat only a Wolf Shifter possessed.

Ryker had come home straight into my arms.

Lifting me from the ground in a single swoop, he hid his face in my neck and hair as my arms draped around his broad shoulders in response, welcoming him. Relief coursed through me, feeling him safe just as a deep breath expanded his chest against mine. He was scenting me. Our bodies flushed with the movement, and a satisfied smile curved my lips while my eyes fell closed—my wolf stirred inside me for his wolf.

“Mate...” he growled against my ear, pretending to bite my neck as he would finally get to do once I turned nineteen and shifted for the first time.

“Soon,” I whispered before his lips captured mine, and I let his adoration engulf my entire being. My wolf rustled inside me contentedly, embracing the familiarity of him. She couldn’t wait to shift and meet his wolf.

Ryker was one of the few constants in my life. We had been promised to each other for so long that the years blurred together, so the anticipation of the day when our wolves would finally meet and get to mate grew each hour.

Was this what humans called love? I wasn’t sure our species experienced things the same way, but it had to be to course through my body like this every time Ryker was near.

We got lost in the kiss, until his nose returned to my neck, taking in my scent once more as though it was the only thing that made him feel like he was truly home.

“I missed you so much, Tasha.” His voice fanned my lips when his head lifted once more, and he briefly looked into my eyes. “Monster after monster we ripped apart, but I just wanted to come back to you.”

My forehead pressed against his and his eyes instantly closed, taking comfort in our contact. “Was it worse than our Alpha predicted?” I asked, pulling back again, caressing the

muscles that instantly tensed along his jaw—drops of dried, red blood were still splattered across his skin.

Ryker's head shook as a dark shadow of disdain and hate crossed his expression. "You have no idea. I don't think the Alpha ever thought it would be this bad. Their numbers have increased, and they are getting dangerously close to the city. It doesn't make sense. It felt planned, like an ambush."

"That's impossible," I whispered, shocked. "Vampires are beasts incapable of any type of thought or intelligence."

"Someone brought them here," Ryker continued, completely lost in thought. "We killed a few of them but most were able to escape. Something's calling them here."

The mere thought terrified me. Throngs of deformed and irrational creatures, stronger and faster than any human, thirsty for blood in an unsuspecting city were the last thing we wanted to happen. Especially, if there was something else out there guiding them, using them as weapons.

A sense of purpose and duty coursed through me instantly, replacing the fear. "Good thing that in two days I'll be able to finally join the Hunters and help kill those beasts."

My future mate's jaw tightened again, but this time, he seemed bothered by my words.

"What is it?" I glanced at him confused. "We've been planning this forever. I'll complete the trial, and shift, our wolves will mate, and then I'll join the Hunters. We'll be stronger together, fighting to protect—"

"Stop, Tasha. Just stop."

Frowning, I shook my head. "What do you mean, stop? We have talked about this so many times—"

"No, Tasha. *You* have talked about this so many times. I just haven't contradicted you. It's not the same."

"You haven't contradicted me?" I asked, bewildered by his rude-ass response. Those were plans we had made together... Or so I'd thought. "What the hell does that mean?"

"Tasha, please," he growled, clearly annoyed.

“No. Tell me what you mean?”

Sighing, like I was a bratty kid giving him a headache, he shook his head. “You are *different*. You are not strong enough to be a Hunter.”

*Different...* The word burned through me.

“I *am* strong enough. There are she-wolves in the Hunters’ already, I can fight alongside them and—”

“You can’t even shift into your wolf without excruciating pain,” he snapped, cutting me off before abruptly dropping me on my feet. “Do you really think you’ll be able to fight those vile monsters? Give me a fucking break, Natasha.” He snidely snorted. “Others have pushed through the pain to at least achieve basic wolf form without the fire magic, but you can’t even do that.”

The loss of his embrace hurt almost as much as his harsh words, but my hands still fisted at my sides, trembling. Pain choked my throat, and yet, it was true. I wasn’t like other she-wolves. I was a broken wolf. While others roamed the forest freely in their wolf forms, I was stuck here with the breeders and their cubs, still struggling to shift on my own.

Unable to become who I knew I was truly meant to be.

“That won’t last forever, and you know it, Ryker!” I shouted back at him, pain and frustration driving my outburst.

Instantly, my future mate’s nostrils flared, and his raven-black eyes glowed an eerie yellow with fury. One should never defy or raise our voice at *the* Beta of the pack. It was disrespectful, and a direct challenge of his supremacy over us.

What felt like my wolf’s fear swirled through me at the sight, eliciting a howl as her body contracted, and though it was the last thing I wanted to do, I submitted, dropping my gaze from his.

“Sorry, Ryker, I didn’t mean to be disrespectful,” I offered through almost gritted teeth while hurt and anger still swirled through me, which probably didn’t help my case. “The *fire ceremony* is only two days away,” I reminded him, forcefully glancing at the ground. “Once I complete the challenge, my



wolf will finally take over and I'll be just like you. I know how to fight. You know this. For years, Isis has trained me so I can hold my own in a battle. I *am* capable.”

Not looking him in the eyes, I risked a glance at his face.

“I know,” he answered, his voice much calmer than I anticipated, while his hand gripped my chin to finish lifting my face. “You’ve worked harder than any she-wolf in the pack, but you are still not ready, Tasha. You’ve never killed a monster, or another shifter for rank. Even after you successfully shift, you will never be ‘just like me’.”

Once again, his statement scorched me, but he was right. Ryker was second in command to our Alpha, not only to our pack but also to the Hunters—an honor earned through years of harsh training, accrued strength, and beating other Betas during a challenge of power. Unlike Alphas, there could be more than one Beta in a pack at any given time, but wolf challenges were fought to the death, so whoever survived became the stronger Beta.

Ryker had climbed quite the shifter ladder to rise to where he was today, and any Betas left knew better than to challenge him.

“There is no place for you in the Hunters,” he continued, driving the knife deeper into my heart. “You belong here, Tasha, in the village, raising our future cubs.”

Oh, hell to the fucking no! Did he just say that to me?

“I’m not *a breeder*,” I seethed, searing fury flaring inside me—like actual flames igniting in my core. A kind of fury that didn’t belong to a lesser she-wolf like me. And yet, I felt it coursing through my veins like fiery lava. “I am the niece of the *Shadow Born* Alpha. His only heir. I am—”

“Exactly, Tasha. You are *all* he has left after his only brother, the late Alpha, and his mate were sliced to pieces by Vampires before his eyes. It’s a miracle that you even survived the attack. He will never knowingly put you in the same kind of danger.”

“I deserve revenge!” I growled. “I need just—” My voice broke with the resentment and anguish squeezing my heart. “I deserve a chance to kill those monsters too.”

Sighing, Ryker slowly nodded, his thumb caressing my cheek in an attempt to soothe me. “I know you believe that, but revenge is not yours to take. It is the Alpha’s, and I will help him deliver it. It is why he gave you to me. Why he chose me as your future mate. Our Alpha *knows* I will always look after you. And I will *never* let you face a Vamp—”

His brows furrowed just as his words halted, and he finally paid attention to my appearance.

*No.*

My stomach sank to the floor.

*No, no, no, no.*

His fingertips rubbed against the other, the creamy foundation and blush spreading over his skin. My future mate’s expression turned from confusion to ire in a split second, and I realized my grave mistake.

I’d forgotten to take off my makeup.

“Damn it, Natasha!” Ryker growled, gripping my jaw firmly and turning my face from side to side to look closer. “Why do you defy your uncle like this? Take that garbage off your face before he sees you.”

“I didn’t do it to defy him,” I defended, hating that I got caught because of my carelessness. Slowly, I pulled my face away from his fierce grasp and lifted the bottom of my white shirt to my cheeks, beginning to wipe them. “It’s only a little makeup, Ryker, and I just do it for me. It makes *me* happy... Why do you all hate human things so much? They are harmless.”

Once again, my gaze fell to the ground.

“You don’t need makeup to ‘feel happy’, you have me. And they are not harmless,” he sneered. “You are degrading yourself by using that human crap. We are above them, Tasha. You are the descendant of an ancient, magical race of Wolf

Shifters. You are not human, so stop acting like one.” His hand flipped the lock of hair that fell over my shoulder with disdain, showing the colored extensions, and then pulled on my sleeve. “And take those ridiculous clothes off too, before he sees you.”

“Ryker!” Our Alpha’s voice sliced the air behind us, and we both stiffened in response.

*Shit. Shit. Shit.*

“Damn it,” my future mate growled under his breath while pinning me with a furious stare that said I was going to get him in trouble too, then turned to face our Alpha—hiding me behind his broad back before lowering his eyes. “Yes, Alpha.”

“Good job leading the Hunters out there, you are becoming the leader I want you to be.” Pride effortlessly exuded from his words, as though he were praising his son.

Ryker’s chest puffed up in response, satisfied by his accomplishment. “Thank you, Arnoldt.” His voice didn’t even twitch when he called our Alpha by his given name. He was the only one ever allowed to do so.

“Where’s Natasha?”

Unfortunately for me, he walked around his Beta, finding me there. Rage immediately ignited his irises the same dangerous yellow all our shifters experienced from the ancient magic within.

“Natasha! How many times do I have to tell you that the world below these mountains is not meant for you?!”

The change in his voice told me exactly what awaited me. It wasn’t the first time my name was distorted by his rage. Too many times to count, actually, but I was still trying to find a way to change that... To prove to him that I was worthy.

It may seem stupid, yet makeup was the only way for me to connect with a world I desperately wished I was part of, and yet, I was strictly forbidden to explore. Thankfully, he didn’t know about the vlog Isis had created for me in the eutubee—where she uploaded my videos each week—or about the thousands of people who looked forward to my videos and

valued what I had to say, even enjoyed what I created. Who knew what our Alpha would do if he ever found out about it.

No, I wasn't human, but sometimes I wished I could be.

“Sir, I already reprimanded her, there's no need to punish—”

Pushing Ryker out of the way, our Alpha's hand viciously wrapped around my arm, and he pulled me toward the house, ignoring his Beta's attempt to save me.

I had defied the Alpha... No one could save me from what was coming now.

## 2

The door slammed against the opposite wall with the force of our Alpha's shove, splitting it in half, and the loud crack battled the pounding echo of my own heart. He yanked me into the room while fearful murmurs, gasps, and even sounds of praise for the leader's actions rose behind us—they, too, knew what was coming.

Isis' suitcase was still opened on the floor, filled with trendy outfits, and hair accessories. Contents of my makeup bin were spread all over the small bed—from when I searched for the new lipsticks she'd bought for me to share in the vlog. Worst of all, the cellphone was still set up on the desk, hooked to the small tripod, recording.

The sight only fueled our Alpha's wrath.

“What is the first rule of the *Shadow Born Pack*?” His breath felt scorching against my cheek as he sneered the question at me.

“Never defy the Alpha...” My voice didn't sound quite like my own as it left my throat, but I willed it to steady. I wasn't really afraid. I'd been the focus of his wrath far too many times to fear it, but the wolf inside me was still submissive to her Alpha. All Wolf Shifters were. It was our nature.

“What is the second rule?” he seethed.

“The human world is forbidden to us,” I answered too low for my benefit.

“I can’t hear you!” Sharp claws dug into my skin when he tightened his vicious hold, eliciting a whimper from my wolf, one I swallowed.

“The human world is strictly forbidden. Only the Hunters may join it,” I forced myself to reply loud and clear, although the rule seemed like a contradiction to me. We were their guardians, meant to always keep them safe. Why couldn’t we just visit, learn from them, maybe even be their friends?

“Does that include human objects?”

“Yes.”

“What is that?” Our Alpha barked, pointing to the phone, but I didn’t answer.

I couldn’t.

I was trying desperately not to cry out as trails of blood freely slipped down my forearm... and I sure as hell wouldn’t give the shifters urging him on the satisfaction. Not anymore.

“What is that?!” The thundering question returned as he motioned to the eyeshadows and brushes, to the pretty clothes on the open suitcase. “What is it?!” His command reverberated through the room, its magic power bouncing off the walls before slamming into me and forcing me to my knees. He never let go of my arm, his claws ripping the skin farther with the movement.

“Human things,” I finally replied through my teeth.

Straightening, my uncle glanced over his shoulder. “Ryker.”

There was no need for him to finish, my future mate and the son he never had knew exactly what to do.

“Get it all out of here, guys,” Ryker ordered from behind me, causing a tear to slowly spread down my heart.

I barely got a chance to see Barrett and Kellan walk past us toward the suitcase and phone, before the grip on my arm became impossibly tighter, and I was jerked to my feet.



“Burn it all,” our Alpha growled, dragging me outside again.

He hauled me all the way to the clearing, walking past the rows of breeders, mates, cubs, and other Omega shifters who were brought to their knees by his influence too—silently commanding them to follow. The Hunters joined us too.

My hands and knees hit the dirt harshly when he released me, the pathway specially carved for the magical fire crystals to be laid stared back at me with pity, only a few feet away.

“I swear, sometimes I don’t know what’s wrong with you!” our Alpha roared while turning to face me.

His German accent was almost gone from all his years living on this mountain, but it always returned the angrier he got—becoming so sharp now that it could probably slice stone.

“You do this two days before the *fire ceremony*, Natasha? Two days?! I should take it away from you. Make you wait another five years to meet your wolf.”

Gasps and cries of shock erupted from the pack around us, even from his Hunters. Not from me, though. I didn’t allow myself to react, even when pure horror unleashed through me.

Five more years would surely kill me...

“Arnoldt...” Ryker’s voice was filled with caution and warning, signaling to the Alpha that he had gone too far this time.

“Were you ever going to let me into the Hunters?” I asked our Alpha instead, lifting my gaze slowly until I met his eyes fully.

His nostrils flared at the clear challenge, mixing with the annoyance spreading over his features, but he remained silent.

“Ryker said you will never let me be a Hunter because of what happened to my parents, and that’s the reason you gave me to him as his mate, because he will follow your command and never let me join either. Is it true?”

A low growl escaped him as his glowing gaze snapped to his Beta. Ryker had disappointed him.

“Forgive me, Alpha,” my future mate instantly offered. “She insisted on that stupid idea of joining the Hunters after the *fire ceremony*, and I’ve had enough of her plans. She’ll be mine soon, so it is time to shut down that nonsense.”

I didn’t need to look at him to know my future mate’s gaze was focused on the ground. Everyone submitted to the *mighty Alpha*, and those who’d ever dared challenge him never lived to tell the tale.

Part of me felt bad for putting Ryker on the spot, yet I didn’t relent. I couldn’t.

“For years you have watched me train and dream about the day I would be able to go out there,” I pressed, forcing his attention to return to me. “You have let me believe that one day I would fight alongside the Hunters, alongside *you*... my uncle—”

“Your *Alpha*,” he growled.

“My Alpha,” I corrected, for some reason the words burned through me like they hadn’t since I was a child. “You made me believe that I would get justice for my parents by ripping those mindless, deformed monsters apart... But it was all a lie, wasn’t it? You never intended to let me leave this mountain.”

Tears stung my eyes like acid as our Alpha’s expression settled on the truth.

However, clear impatience carved his features as though I was having a tantrum for a toy. “I have more important things to worry about than your “dreams”. Like a superior Wolf Shifter race to lead, and the entire human race to oversee. It was easier to let you focus on your delusions.”

Vines with thorns seemed to wrap around my eyes as I looked up at him, increasing my pain—though, perhaps it was just the force of the dominance exuding from his irises and demanding my submission. Still, I couldn’t bring myself to look away. What they saw as “nonsense” or “delusion”, had

been the one hope that kept me going all these years. The dream that one day I would get to meet the humans I was created to protect, and I'd finally get justice for my parents' murder.

"Please, I can't spend my entire life confined to this village," I begged, somehow holding back the true agony I wouldn't dare show. Against every ounce of self-preservation that told me to just look down and submit, against the anxious wolf stirring inside me, I begged. "I know in my soul that I was born to keep humans safe. Not just from the shadows, but by being among them, by being part of their world."

With each word our Alpha's wrath increased, the shift partially taking hold of him. His jaw enlarged, fur burst along his arms, and thick, bowed claws elongated to their full length. His form trembled with the restraint it took to keep himself a man, but I kept going because this was my truth, and I couldn't hold it back anymore.

I was tired of holding back.

"It's a need that tightens its grip on me every second of every hour, becoming stronger each day until it suffocates me. I am meant to be out there, with all of you. I know it in every fiber of my being, I—"

"Silence!" His roar sent a wave of power trembling over the village, slamming into us and sending everyone to their knees yet again. The cubs whined around us, and I could hear their little feet scurrying so they could hide behind their mothers from its might. "You will *never* speak to me that way again, Natasha. Or I swear I will make you pay."

*"I will make you pay..."*

Sharp stabbing engulfed my eyes, forcing me to rapidly blink the sting away as I continued to hold his gaze, not because I was challenging his power, but because I was trying to excuse the simmering hate filtering through his irises. It was so reminiscent of the hatred he showed when he spoke of those blood-sucking monsters that it froze me in place.

The sweltering tension became thicker among the pack with every second my gaze remained locked on our Alpha's, more from disbelief than anything else. He stepped closer, eyes growing wild with my disrespect while the unexpected revulsion became stronger, making my wolf slam against my skin over and over in her frantic need to submit and save us.

Unfortunately for her, she was tied to me for life.

Deep inside, I'd feared that my uncle—the only family I had left—secretly hated me for what happened to my parents—to *his* brother. I was only a cub then, a baby, but we were on a nightly walk when we got attacked, and I was the only one who survived.

I guessed now I had my answer.

*I mean, he won't even let me call him uncle.*

“Tasha!” Ryker growled under his breath next to me, in a desperate attempt to remind me of my place and get me to submit.

Not needed.

Now I knew that I was no one, and I would never get the chance to be anything else.

Briefly closing my eyes, I slowly lowered my head, feeling the heavy tension that surrounded us finally dissipate. A unified breath of relief extended through the entire village.

Stepping back, our Alpha's stance relaxed too, though his wolf remained close to the surface. “Perhaps you need to be reminded of who you are... Shift!”

There it was. His favorite punishment for me.

His command swept over me, and my wolf stood at attention. Her eagerness to finally come out was only overshadowed by the hesitance we both felt at the agony we were certainly about to experience. Especially, after our Alpha had already put us through this the day before they left hunting, just to make sure I hadn't “hurt my wolf,” or “pushed it away,” with my *inability* and *lack of strength*.

*“I’m so sorry I’m putting you through this again,”* I apologized to my wolf because she had nothing to do with the treatment we were getting, it was all my fault. *“You are not alone; I have your back.”*

A current of strength traveled through my being in response, and I knew it was her way of saying she had my back. I wasn’t alone either.

Closing my eyes once more, I took a settling breath and rose on my hands and knees, pushing my wolf forward. Instantly, it felt like frigid ice had captured my cells one by one, fighting against us and preventing the shift. I pushed through it, though, focusing only on my true nature.

The she-wolf.

The cracking sound of my bones alerted the others that my transformation had begun, reverberating along the clearing until a few whimpers escaped my fiercely clamped mouth—no matter how hard I tried to remain silent.

*“It’s okay, we can do this...”*

My reassurance gave my wolf more resilience and she thrust against my skin, making her light grey claws rip through my nail beds. A scream attempted to escape me, but I turned it into a fierce growl and pressed harder, feeling my ribs fracture and begin to transform.

When my eyes snapped open, I noticed the breeders shifting into their beautiful she-wolves and forming a wide circle around me. Their thick raven-black coats shone brightly under the morning sun as they stood tall in solidarity. Tears came to my eyes, but it wasn’t from the pain capturing my being. It was the love I felt emanating from them.

It was a shame that communicating mentally wasn’t a gift Wolf Shifters had. I would have loved to hear their words of encouragement. Even then, their display gave me power, and I forced my wolf forward again and again, another growl ripping its way through my throat just as the first locks of fur burst from me.

“You are *not* like us, Natasha.” Our Alpha seethed while he glared at me. “You are different, and always will be.” The scolding I’d heard every time I tried and failed to shift thundered in my ears, and my gaze slowly lowered.

Dull white fur spread over my hands, instead of the beautiful and lustrous raven-black coat of our magical race.

My failing.

My curse.

Wanting to expand into powerful hind legs, my thighs and knees began to crack, bones shifting and rearranging roughly without magic. Yet, as my arms partially extended, my hands fully turning into thick paws, an excruciating surge of blazing agony burned through my being. It centered over my spine and back until it sucked the air right out of my lungs.

This was as far as I had ever been able to reach.

“Aaah!” The scream ripped from my throat when the oxygen returned, unable to be held back, ringing along the snow-covered peaks that watched me struggle, and force myself to keep going. “*Don’t stop!*” I begged my wolf, knowing the torture she was also going through right now.

Because that was all this was for us. Torture.

*“Moon Goddess, please... Please, help me.”*

Sadly, I knew my plea fell on deaf ears because even when we liked to imagine the great silver moon in the sky as our creator, the truth was she didn’t exist. We didn’t come from her, no matter how many tribal tales were written about us, or how badly we wished there was a powerful being watching over us and helping us.

It wasn’t real.

Witches had created us.

Humans had Wolf Shifters to look over them, but we were alone.

Ryker’s majestic raven-black wolf appeared before me then, his bright yellow eyes poised on me. Seeing his wolf

there, supporting me like the breeders were—even after what he'd said—gave me some relief, and I used that as my strength. Although he was our Alpha's Beta, I believed he would always be there for me.

“Aaah!” Another scream ripped from me as the intensity of the pain on my back became unbearable. It felt like my spine would pop out of my body. The agony stirred the emotion I kept buried deep within me to survive, and my throat constricted.

Why did I keep putting myself, my wolf, through this? Why was the need to be part of the human world so all-consuming for me? Was any of this worth it?

My wolf whined deeply, as though in a quiet *yes*, but I wasn't so sure anymore.

Maybe my uncle was right. Maybe I kept doing this to myself the more I tried to be part of a world they knew was not meant for me... Maybe I deserved this.

“That's enough!” A feminine voice boomed with Alpha power of its own through the clearing, making me think that maybe the Moon Goddess existed after all, and she'd heard my desperate prayer.

I didn't need to turn to know who my savior was, neither did any of the shifters who swiftly shuffled out of her way—even the Hunters, though they weren't happy about it. A few growls rose from them as she approached, clearly hating her guts, yet I felt nothing but relief.

Our Alpha's fiery gaze snapped from my face to my savior's, his ire at the interruption matched only by his annoyance at who had interfered in his little show. When my eyes returned to his, pleading for him to order me to stop, a new wave of ire rushed over his expression, and his entire form tensed.

“Shut your eyes!” he ordered instead, and I swiftly complied.

I didn't need to wonder why; I knew my eyes were glowing blue instead of the dark yellow our mystical race

boasted.

My failing.

My curse...

He didn't tell me to stop shifting, but in all honesty, it wasn't a choice. I had no more strength left to keep trying even if I wanted.

"Isis!" our Alpha snarled as though pronouncing her name left venom on his tongue. "How dare you interfere?!"

"Well, *my Alpha*," she began, harsh sarcasm dripping from her words while she walked toward the carved pathway. "I just thought that since you sentenced me to 'eternal servitude' to you, aka, taking care of your niece until I die or get eaten by Vampires—you know, after you tried to force me to mate with your old second in command, but I refused him, so he challenged me and then proceeded to lose the challenge? So embarrassing for him, by the way," she rambled, forcing Ryker to move clear out of her way when she stopped in front of me. "Then you sentenced me to death for disobedience, as an Alpha does, but every wolf you sent my way lost the battle against me, until I actually became a self-made, she-wolf Alpha. Like, whaaa?! Crazy, right? I mean, that's got to be a kick in the balls if I ever saw one."

Our Alpha's growl vibrated with both frustration and anger, but all I could do was work on steadying my breathing through the pain and exhaustion... and low-key try to stop myself from smirking.

"Sorry, *my Alpha*. I apologize for upsetting you. It just seemed like you needed a reminder of our history together. Just as you might also need to be reminded that you already put Tasha through this little 'exercise' of yours a week ago. And that you put her through the agony of trying to shift without fire magic once a month, even though you know *very well* that only a handful of *Shadow Born* shifters have *ever* been able to shift without magic, and most of them are already dead."



All mocking now gone, she crossed her arms defiantly, the emotion replaced by her admonishment. Her gaze bored into his fiercely, without any fear or need for submission.

“Now, seeing as you have me in charge of her wellbeing, but she is bleeding profusely on the ground when, *again*, you know her ability to self-heal is non-existent until she completes the fire trial, *and* successfully shifts into her wolf...” She let the statement linger, waiting for him to connect the dots. “See where I’m going with this? It just seems counterproductive to me.”

Contempt engulfed her every word, causing me to glance down at myself. My arms and hands were back to normal, except nasty, uneven gashes cut up my skin where the wolf bones had protruded—blood seeping from them freely, especially from my lifted fingernails. Blood stained my pants too; the pretty ones Isis had bought me.

Sadness spread within my chest, but not for the ruined clothes or my injuries, it was for my trapped wolf. “*I’m so sorry...*”

Her exhausted moan resounded in my ears, the aching telling me she was sorry too for not being strong enough to come out yet.

When my eyes slowly lifted to the closest thing I had to a mother, and my best friend, she offered me a soft smile and a wink, even though her unadulterated rage swirled just under the surface. If she could, she would tear my uncle apart piece by piece for hurting me, and not lose a single night of sleep afterward.

He probably wanted the same for her, but neither of them had challenged the other through the years, so they were forced to co-exist.

Trepidation briefly crossed Isis’ expression, and she lowered herself to my level, gently cupping my cheek. “Close your eyes, baby girl.”

So, I did. I closed them for her without question because I trusted Isis with my life. Before I did, though, I caught her

offering our Alpha an elaborate, and mocking bow.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to take my charge to our home to begin healing her wounds. Unless there is something else you feel like putting her through?”

Our Alpha’s rage was palpable, trembling through the air and crashing against my skin, but it still took him a few seconds to respond.

“*I am the Shadow Born* Alpha, and my word is law!” he declared loud enough for the whole pack to hear. “The fire ceremony will be held as scheduled... All those due to walk the crystals shall walk.”

A second wave of relief swept the village, including mine.

“Take my niece home and heal her wounds,” he ordered Isis, and I could almost see her rolling her eyes in my mind. That was exactly what she’d just said. “But if you ever bring any more human things into my village, and give them to my niece, you will suffer the grave consequences... I will no longer be lenient with you.”

Isis’ arms carefully wrapped around me, lifting me from the ground with ease thanks to her shifter strength, and I weakly draped a hand behind her neck. My gashes pulled open with the movement, making me whimper.

“I’ll carry her,” Ryker immediately argued, a man again, but his attempt at telling Isis what to do elicited a menacing growl from her, and I internally cringed.

She was in protecting mode right now, and to put it mildly, he wasn’t her favorite person.

“Out. Of. My. Way. Boy!” she ordered, using *all* of her Alpha power against him, and probably enjoying every second of it.

“Why do you have to be so harsh with him?” I whispered after she took me away. Ryker had clearly gotten out of her way without a voiced protest. “He’s my future mate.”

“Oh, sweet baby girl. If he were your mate, he would have protected you from your uncle,” she whispered back, kissing

my temple.

The statement stung my heart, but she was wrong. Ryker was *the* Beta of the pack, there wasn't much he could do but follow his Alpha's commands.

As we walked, I was grateful my eyes were closed, so that I didn't have to see the looks of pity and contempt from the rest of the village. The last thing I wanted was to find out what they thought of me.

Closing the half-split door behind us, Isis set me on the bed. "You can open your eyes now, Tasha."

As soon as I did, I wished I hadn't. Gasping, I sat up too quickly to realize what I was doing. The slashes on my skin burned and protested with the movement, yet I was too busy looking at the destruction of the only place I'd ever called home. My bed was flipped on its side, so was the desk, and remnants of the human possessions I had cherished were thrown all over the floor.

The sight ignited both resentment and guilt in my being. "Forgive me, Isis. This is all my fault. If I hadn't been so startled by the Hunters arriving, by Ryker being back, and ran out of the house, I could have prevented all of this. If I'd just—"

"Yeah, love makes us stupid like that." A grin curved her lips when I gave her a menacing look, but my mouth still twitched with amusement. "It doesn't matter," she assured, handing me a brown, glass bottle like she did every month—without exception. "Drink this, it will make you feel better."

The liquid smoothly slid down my throat, leaving behind its tingling power, but my attention was still on the broken mirror across from us. My skin tightened while Isis spread the healing salve over every one of my injuries, and I half helped remove my pants, noticing the lacerations of my thighs extended all the way to my knees.

It shouldn't have to be this way for us, for me.

Inevitably, my attention returned to the mirror, and the face staring back at me was haunting.

Standing from the bed as Isis put the healing potions back in their place, I walked to the desk, feeling my wounds vanish—thanks to the Witch’s magic. My hesitant fingers wrapped around the chair’s back, lifting it right side up until I could sit back on it. The cracked mirror surface split my reflection into several ones, and still, all of them showed the gruesome flaw that marred my life.

Three slashes made by Vampire claws crossed my left eye—from my eyebrow to my cheekbone.

That mark was the reason Isis introduced me to makeup. It was my desperate need to somehow erase the reminder of my parents’ deaths from sight... the reminder of my very first failure. It was also the reason I started every video with the foundation already covering my face... but my mask was gone now, leaving only pain and regret in its wake.

I was only a cub when they died, unable to even hold a single memory of the tragedy that forced our lives to change forever. Still, that mark had successfully made me feel responsible because every time I looked at myself in the mirror, I was reminded that I somehow survived when they didn’t... And I hated myself for it.

Picking up a broken container of makeup remover, I swiped the bit left inside and spread it over my face, until Isis’ reflection joined mine.

“Don’t you know it’s bad luck to look at yourself in a broken mirror?”

“I don’t think there is anything else that could go wrong in my life...”

“Yeah, well. Don’t tempt fate either!”

A humorless snort escaped me because although I wasn’t superstitious, like her, chances were whatever could go wrong for me already had.

“It’s not your fault, baby girl. It never was,” she added, knowing exactly what was in my heart.

Slowly, I turned to face her as she used a tissue to gently wipe off the remnants of my foundation. Isis’ hand swiped

over my damaged skin lovingly, her expression saying that no matter what, I was special to her.

I lost myself looking at her, because unlike me and the rest of the shifters here—with fair skin and German descent—Isis' skin bore a deep, tanned hue that made you think she had put gold shimmer all over her body. Her dark brown hair fell in a wonderful mixture of perfectly formed curls and defiant messy waves down her back. Or what she called *crazy woman's hair*. It was like her strands couldn't quite decide what to be, so they were everything all at once.

Her eyes were as dark as her hair, but filled with a light that made them shine bright golden in the sun. Sometimes, I imagined she might even look like the Egyptian Goddess she was named after. Truth be told, it wasn't Isis' exotic features that made her so beautiful, it was her loving soul and the relentless inner strength she possessed.

She was forty-four years old, so by no means an old shifter, but she had been through so much in her life and never let it define her.

Just as she threw in our Alpha's face after she arrived, Isis fought against the mate he forced on her, his then Beta, and bested him. Even after his claws ripped through the tendons and nerves of her right arm, she never stopped fighting for her right to choose the life she wanted and knew she deserved. The moment she killed him, she won the right to be a lone wolf, and no one could *ever* take that away from her, not even our Alpha.

Unfortunately, the wounds in her arm were so deep that not even her Wolf Shifter powers, or Witch magic, could fully heal her. A mark created by a torn nerve now sat on the back of her arm, restricting her movements, and reminding her of that day, but that had always been one thing that united us. In a strange way, we were both broken.

Her disability didn't stop her, though, if anything, it made her determination stronger. It restricted certain things for her, yes, but she never saw her limitations as a weakness, pushing through every obstacle that came her way. No matter what, Isis

always kept going, and I admired her for that. One day, I hoped to be as strong as she was, inside and out, but that was impossible for an Omega like me.

“You are going to make me blush if you keep looking at me like that.”

“Like what?” I asked, feigning confusion.

“Like I’m the awesomest, most bad-ass shifter in the entire world. I mean, I am, but still. I’m humble, you know...”

That brought a chuckle out of me, because although she joked about it to make me smile, she was very humble. Still, I knew she had become an Alpha she-wolf by her sheer will to survive, but I’d been too small to watch it all happen.

“Will you tell me what happened after you won that first challenge?”

Sighing, Isis nodded. “Well, your uncle sentenced me to exile or death for my ‘disobedience’, yet I refused to leave the mountain. After my pack was slaughtered in Egypt, I nearly thought I would die from the pain. But then I crossed the world, looking for others like me, and eventually ended up here. I just knew one thing. I couldn’t leave what I had found here, and not everyone was an asshole like Arnoldt.”

I shook my head, yet I couldn’t help but chuckle.

“So, I fought over and over again for my right to be here. For my right to live the way I wanted to live... Honestly, winning all those challenges transformed me into something I never even dreamed I could be.”

“I’m sure you were an Alpha from the start, you just hadn’t discovered it yet.”

Appreciation engulfed her features. “Eventually, he withdrew the kill order, but sentenced me to ‘eternal servitude.’” She made air quotes and rolled her eyes like it was the stupidest thing in the world. “And yet, my mission to raise and look after you, ended up being my biggest blessing.” Her soft hand cupped my cheek, a thumb caressing my skin.

The rest I knew well. Feared by the pack after such a feat, she was left alone to roam the mountain and the human world alike, which in turn, kind of opened the door to our shenanigans.

“You know, I could challenge your uncle and win,” she added. “The only thing is I’d have to deal with all those stupid hunters defending the ‘Alpha’s honor’ afterward, and ain’t nobody got time for that. Besides, I don’t want to ruin my nails with his blood... They have glitter.”

Her brown eyes shone with mischief as she wiggled her sparkling nails in front of me, but she accomplished what she had set out to do, make me laugh. Our chuckles mixed in the air, and I shook my head at her dark humor.

Until I learned Isis wasn’t one of us, but an Egyptian Shifter, I’d always thought the *Shadow Born Pack* was the only magical shifter race that existed. Granted, I didn’t truly know anything because I had never stepped foot in the human world, so there was that. I guessed the Witch that created us made her pack before she made ours.

“Thank you for saving me,” I whispered to her, suddenly overwhelmed with the emotion I’d done my best to repress from our Alpha and the others. “If you hadn’t arrived when you did, I don’t know what—” My voice caught, and I shook my head, seeing the tears blur my vision.

Placing a kiss over the mark on my eye, Isis wrapped her arms around me again, but this time, all the love she held inside engulfed me, making me hold her even tighter. “I’m sorry I wasn’t here earlier, Tasha. I’m so, so sorry.”

It wasn’t her fault. It never was.

“I’m so lucky to have you.”

“No, baby girl. I’m the lucky one...”

In the safety of her embrace, I released the pain I kept buried, feeling the searing tears effortlessly fall down my face and onto her shoulder. The rips of my heart hurt far more than the ones my body had ever suffered, but Isis held me in silence through it all...

Like only a mother could.



### 3

“I ’m jumping into the shower and then we can have breakfast, okay?” Isis’ voice pulled my attention away from the colorful rising sun over the mountain peaks, and back into the room.

She was pulling her towel from the closet, and the basic linen top and pants we were all given to wear—since shifters “didn’t need clothes”. Ugh. I hated those things. They were itchy and provided no support for *the girls*.

“Okay, I’ll get dressed and wait for you here.”

I’d showered in the middle of the night so no one from the village would see my swollen eyes. Thankfully, everyone was sleeping. Still, I was grateful that Isis was with me because although the potion and salve healed my injuries on the surface, the trauma my body suffered with the effort to shift was still present. I’d truly needed her help to get there and back.

Nodding, she threw me a wink and left.

With a sigh, I closed the blinds once more and limped to the closet, changing into my linen top and pants. Folding the top to make it shorter, I tied it in the back with a knot just like Isis had shown me, then lowered the pants to my hips. If I had to wear this fashion no-no, at least I could try to make it cuter.

A knock on the door startled me, and I glanced around the room, wondering if Isis had forgotten something. Then again, why would she knock when she could just walk back in?

“It’s me!” Ryker’s voice floated into the room, and I glanced at the door, hesitantly.

I wasn’t quite sure how I felt about everything that happened, including his part in it. *He has to listen to the Alpha, there was nothing he could do...* my conscience reminded me.

Unfortunately for me, another voice rang in my head... “*If he were really your mate, he would have protected you from your uncle.*” Was she right? Isis’ statement only emboldened my indecision.

Moot point though, because he took the choice away from me, as usual, by opening the door and entering.

*Stupid doors without locks.*

“What are you doing, Ryker? You know Isis doesn’t like you inside her house when she isn’t here.”

He snorted, as though it was ridiculous that I expected him to respect any boundaries she placed. “She is only here to protect you; she has no influence over me.”

“She’s an Alpha, she has influence over *everyone* here. And you sure moved out of her way fast enough after she told you to.” I crossed my arms over my chest, irked at him for talking that way about Isis. I hated it when others disrespected her. It pissed me off.

Ryker’s nostrils flared at my response, a hint of dark yellow glimmering in his raven-black eyes.

My wolf shuddered inside me at the sight, her emotions engulfing me whole. Frankly, she was kind of right. I wasn’t sure what the hell got into me, making me talk back to *the* Beta of the pack and my future mate that way after what happened yesterday. Annoyed by my wolf’s overwhelming reaction to my behavior, I dropped my arms and forced my gaze to the ground, though I refused to apologize.

“She is not *my* Alpha,” he growled, clearly offended by my previous statement.

“No, she’s not,” I replied, keeping my voice grounded. “But she is the only person here who dared stand up for me and save me from my uncle.”

An insulted scoff left him. “Arnoldt wasn’t doing anything to you. He was just asking you to try harder so you could shift without magic as I did before my fire ceremony. And I did try to help, but he is our Alpha, and I can’t go against him, even if I wanted to... In the end, those were the consequences of *your actions*.” He pointed a single finger at me with the words, reigniting my attitude. “You only brought that on yourself, Natasha. Don’t forget that.”

My hands fisted with his words, but I bit my tongue, not saying a single word. I did wonder though, if this was meant to be my life, why did Ryker’s actions, or lack thereof, bother me so much? We weren’t human. We were Wolf Shifters, and I was a simple Omega... Why couldn’t I just be like the other females, modest and submissive? Grateful that the Beta of the pack was my future mate.

Why did I want more?

However, Ryker was right about one thing. No one in the pack could contradict the Alpha because obedience was ingrained in our hierarchy, our nature, and the power he held over us—unless of course, they challenged him and were prepared to lose their life in the process.

Only another Alpha could ever go against my uncle, the very reason Isis always defended me. Granted, she also loved riling him up but that was another conversation entirely.

I couldn’t judge Ryker for not doing what Isis would, right?

Ryker stepped closer but I didn’t look at him or embrace him. Rooted in place by sheer stubbornness and confusion, I remained silent. I was so puzzled about how I felt.

My wolf stirred in my chest, wanting to be closer to her mate, even after he’d said those things. Couldn’t she tell I wanted to smack him? Sometimes I hated that her feelings had

such influence over me, then again, so did mine over her. We were one, whether we liked it or not.

Sighing, Ryker came even closer, probably smelling the need for him exuding from my she-wolf's scent. "It's this obsession you have with the human world, Tasha. You know the rules and you break them anyway. The only human things allowed here are the ones your uncle graciously provides us. Stop defying Arnoldt, and you won't suffer anymore. When will you realize that it's up to you?"

Was it?

His hand curved around my hip, and he grabbed my chin, lifting it until I looked up at him.

"I didn't come to fight; I came to see how you were doing. I don't want you to hurt like you did yesterday, so don't do that again. Okay? If you remember your place, none of this will continue to happen." His words were soft and warm against my lips, and my wolf yearned for him, the feeling growing inside me and muddling my mind.

"I won't do it again," I mumbled, exhausted by this whole mess.

Satisfied by my compliance, Ryker smiled and claimed my lips, pulling my wolf forward until I was lost in her need for his wolf.

"Let's go have breakfast," he added, taking my hand, and pulling me through the door.

"Hold on," I protested, stopping just outside. "I'm going to eat with Isis, so I have to wait. She went to shower but is coming back any second."

"No. We are not waiting for her. I want to eat with you, and you are my mate. If I say we eat together, then *we* eat together."

He pulled me again, leaving no room for discussion, but I grunted, yanking my hand out of his as we passed the trees and bushes that bordered our village.

“What now, Natasha?” he growled, clearly frustrated with me. “This behavior needs to stop. We are mating tonight, and you can’t be *the* Beta’s mate and go against my word every time you want. I won’t have that. How would that make me look in front of your uncle?”

Moving away when he stepped closer, I glanced at him confused *and* insulted. “I don’t go against your word every time I want—WAIT!” I blinked up at him, mind whirling as I finally processed his full statement. “Mating tonight? We are not mating tonight! It’s happening tomorrow, *after* I complete the magical fire trial and I’m able to meet my wolf. It’s tradition. Once she is out, *then* our wolves can mate. Not before.”

Why was I freaking out? My heart started racing the second I realized what he said, and my voice got so high I might as well be whistling. Hadn’t I waited for this my entire life? To transform, mate with him, and visit the human world?

*Yeah, but the transformation has to happen first, and my wolf and I are no longer going to the human world, like, ever.*

“We can’t mate until after *our* wolves do, Ryker. It has to be tomorrow after the *fire ceremony*.”

An amused smile spread over his lips, and he pulled me by the waist until our bodies pressed together. “Mmm, I wished you could hear the way your heart is beating for me right now...” He chuckled when I glared at him for an explanation. “I asked your uncle permission for us to mate as man and woman first, and he approved it. Today you become my mate, and tomorrow our wolves will seal the bond. No more waiting, Tasha. Tonight, you’ll finally be mine.”

My mouth opened to argue but a vicious hiss split the air from the other side of the bushes, echoing between us like a deadly warning, and leaving me cold.

Ryker’s eyes grew wild with the sound of danger, immediately glowing. “Vampires!” he roared, his Beta power spreading through the village a second before he turned and lunged toward the trees, shifting effortlessly into a massive

raven-black wolf. Growling Hunters ran past me the next second, answering his call.

The Vampires had found our home, and they probably came for blood.

Panting for air I stumbled backward while screams of panic erupted from the breeders all over, and I slammed into someone.

“It’s okay, baby girl. It’s just me,” Isis assured as I whirled around.

“Vampires!” I squealed, pointing to the tree line while clearly losing it.

Her lips twitched. “I thought you wanted to kill them and get revenge?”

“Stop mocking me!” I smacked her arm. “They are here, in the village! We have to protect the cubs and their mamas. Don’t just stand there!”

“Calm down,” she cooed, holding me by the arms before I could run toward the others, though amusement still danced over her face. Giving into my calls of alarm, she glanced to where the Hunters disappeared and took a deep breath—scenting the air. When her eyes opened again, actual laughter escaped her. “That’s nothing, Tasha.”

“What do you mean, nothing?” I screeched. “I heard the hiss. Ryker and the Hunters—”

“Trust me. The cubs and their mamas are safe,” she assured, looking into my eyes with absolute certainty. “Now, let’s have some breakfast. I’m starving.”

Taking my hand, she guided me away from there while doors slammed closed one after the other as our breeders hid, protecting their cubs from the ultimate predator. Isis, however, strolled along the houses with me beside her while whistling a happy tune like everything was fine. Apparently, her only concern was whether or not there would still be bacon in the communal dining room.

---

No threats, or danger.

No Vampires.

Not a single one.

We were safe.

Isis had been right. The hunters found nothing on their search of the mountain, but then, where had that vicious hiss come from?

With Ryker's reassurance, the entire village calmed down, breeders and cubs coming out of their houses for their daily chores or playing. Trusting his Beta blindly, our Alpha ordered the preparations for the *Fire Ceremony* to continue, but this strange feeling had gotten inside of me, and I just couldn't let it go.

There was still a threat. There *was* danger. We were not safe.

Something was out there... I could feel it in my bones.

"Will you stop being so paranoid?" Isis called from behind me, trying to shift my attention from the trees that bordered our village back to her. "I told you everything is fine."

My teeth nervously bit into my bottom lip with each swipe of my gaze through the forest and bushes. I'd kept a vigilant eye on it since this morning, just waiting for something weird to spring out and attack. Sure, I'd never been in front of a Vampire, but I could almost see them in my mind's eye thanks to all of our Alpha's and Ryker's accounts of their hunting trips.

Those monsters were seven feet tall, hunched over from the humps protruding along their spine, with long arms that bent awkwardly and claws as long as a Wolf Shifter's. Their sharp fangs sliced through the skin with ease, even their own, which caused them to drool blood sometimes, and in turn, it enticed their hunger. They had eyes permanently glazed over with a weird white film that Ryker believed was what helped them see at night, while their skin held a decaying, grey hue—a result of them being stuck between the living and the dead at the same time.

Worst of all, some of them had leathery wings, which made them more dangerous, and the very reason it took an entire hunter's pack to attack and kill just a few of them. The second Vampires took to the sky, all bets were off.

“Earth calling Natasha...”

Finally dragging my eyes away from the bushes, I turned on the picnic table and gave my full attention to Isis. “Are you sure there's nothing out there? I can't escape this feeling... like we are being watched, surveyed.”

“Do you trust me?” Isis asked instead, and I rolled my eyes, making her smirk. “There is nothing dangerous out—” She paused, thinking better of it. “At least not for you. However, the bears, cougars, coyotes, bobcats, natural wolves, snakes, and spiders might not be too welcoming to humans up here.”

“Ha. Ha. Very funny.”

“Why, thank you.” She winked at me, her gaze briefly traveling past me to the forest before she downed another forkful of pie.

We loved it when it was Frederica's turn to make dessert in the communal kitchen. Her pies were the most decadent things we'd ever tasted—it was her absolute weakness. But who could blame her?

“There is something else bothering you, though,” she guessed, knowing me too well.

The news Ryker shared echoed in my mind, and I straightened on the bench, suddenly way too interested in the rusted nail poking through the greyed-out, warped wood. Lunch had come and gone, and I still hadn't found a way to tell her about it.

“What is it?”

Sighing, I glanced up at her, thinking it was best to just rip the banbraid. “Ryker told me we are mating tonight.”

The fork flew from Isis' hand as she lunged to her feet in both shock and ire, the bench flipping to the ground behind



her. “The hell you are!”

Her shout caused all heads to snap toward us, but they turned away the second her glare fell on them.

“Calm down,” I whisper-hissed, calling her attention to me.

“You can’t mate tonight,” she argued. “You haven’t completed the fire trial, your wolf isn’t even out yet, and—”

“He asked our Alpha for permission so we could mate as man and woman first, then as wolves tomorrow, and his request was granted.”

Flames might as well have ignited in her irises, they glowed a dangerous light gold before she whirled around, marching away from me.

*Shit. Shit. Shit.*

“Isis!” I rushed after her. “What are you doing?”

“I’m going to have a very ‘spirited’ conversation with *my Alpha*, that’s exactly what I’m going to do,” she growled, heading straight for the Alpha’s cabin.

*No. No. No.*

“Isis, please stop.” My words rushed as I struggled to keep up with her ridiculously long steps, guided by her indignation and her she-wolf’s speed. “He’s going to hurt you!”

A loud, derisive snort escaped her. “I’d like to see him try. That self-entitled, misogynistic, gaslighting, piece of—” The words muddled under her breath, and then she quickened her pace. “What the hell was Ryker thinking?” she asked rhetorically, I assumed, since she didn’t exactly wait for my answer or my protest.

“This is exactly why I didn’t want to tell you,” I growled, fully running after her now since my she-wolf’s speed was still trapped inside of me, with her. “Stop, damn it. You are going to end up in a challenge with my uncle and he *will* kill you, Isis. Can’t you understand?”

Gripping her arm, I yanked her toward me, forcing her to stop.

“I’m going to lose you!” I blurted, breathless.

“Okay, give me some credit, will ya? I can take his old ass any day of the week.”

“I can’t—” My head shook, trying to push the emotion back down to the depths of me, where it hid from everyone except her. “I can’t lose you, Isis. You are the only Mom I have.”

All lightheartedness gone, her eyes glistened, and she pulled me into her arms the next second, holding me fiercely.

“Listen to me, baby girl. I am always, *always*, going to be there for you.”

Her lips pressed gently but meaningfully against my temple, and she pulled back, cupping my cheeks until our gazes truly connected.

“There is no force in this world that can take me away from you because *you* are the true reason that I refused to leave this pack. You hear me? It was you, Natasha. I fought to survive as hard as I did, killing shifter after shifter because you gave my life new meaning. You gave me purpose and I was *not* about to lose that. But right now, I need to delay your mating with that asshole. There is nothing more important than that.”

Whirling around she began to march toward our Alpha’s house again... And after her, I went. “Wait!”

“What?” she stopped willingly this time, glancing at me expectantly.

“I know you don’t like Ryker and you hate the fact that my uncle wants us together, but Ryker was always meant to be my mate,” I explained, seeing sadness grow in her eyes. “It’s not the same,” I whispered, knowing the cause of her hurt. “I know you want to protect me, and you think our Alpha is forcing me to be with Ryker like he wanted to force you with his Beta, but—”

“I know that you think you love him, baby girl,” she rebutted, holding my hands, “so just do one thing for me. Block your uncle’s, and Ryker’s voice from your mind. Heck, block my voice while you are at it, and everything we have ever told you that you should do. Now, look inside your heart and ask yourself, is this really what you want? If you could choose a new life, a new future right here and now—regardless of pack hierarchy, Alpha, or supernatural rules—would you want this life? Would you choose Ryker?”

Releasing a burdened breath, she tightened her hold on my hands.

“If the answer is yes, I will walk back to our home and you can mate with him as man and woman tonight, then tomorrow as wolves. I’ll even move all your things to his cabin for you. But it has to be what *you* want. So, what do *you* want, Natasha?”

Images of Ryker and I together began to flash in my mind. He’d been part of my life for so long... Still, I couldn’t stop the unexpected racing of my heart at the sudden possibilities slamming into me as I searched for the answer inside me. Glancing away from her, my attention shifted beyond the ever-changing trees to the city, to the world that awaited. One I dreamed of every night. A throbbing yearning for the unknown spread through my veins, overwhelming me.

My wolf stirred too, sending a feeling of familiarity and acceptance through me, the feeling capturing my chest briefly. She wanted to meet Ryker’s wolf, she wanted a mate. Even then... Did that mean I wanted *him*? Behind her willingness, anxiousness flourished, bringing with it both sadness and confusion.

When my gaze returned to Isis, I opened my mouth to speak, but surprisingly, I had no words to give her.

Understanding filled her gaze and she slowly nodded. “That’s what I suspected... Don’t worry, I’m not going to challenge *my Alpha*.” With a small wink, she gave me her back, leaving me behind as she headed for his cabin.

Biting my lower lip, and low-key still questioning my entire life, I turned around too, heading back to the clearing.

The excitement once again danced in the air when I arrived, and I caught the moment the Hunters brought out three massive, wooden chests from the mystical forest. Kellan, Ivara, and Barret carried them between their arms like they weighed nothing, while Ryker proudly led the way. Only our Alpha knew where the crystals were safeguarded in between ceremonies—it had to be that way to protect them. With the Witch that created us long gone and the natural crystal source now barren, those were the only stones left.

My heart started racing again, but for an entirely new reason.

The ancient crystals and the source of our mystical power had finally arrived, making it all so very real. Renewed exhilaration coursed through me, my wolf's happiness mixing with mine.

Before I could process my movements, I stopped right in front of the path carved just for them. I wasn't the only one. The entire village began to gather around it, wanting to get a peak of the marvelous display that would shortly follow.

Placing the chests on the ground at the beginning of the path, Kellan, Ivara, and Barret looked to their leader, the only one entrusted with the key. Ryker knelt in front of them and removing the key from the chain that hung over his neck, he unlocked the first chest.

The second the lid fell back, and the beaming sun hit its contents, an aura of radiance burst from the chest, bathing Ryker and the nearby area in the most breathtaking golden light. His eyes found me then, and he smiled at me, looking so handsome that I thought my wolf might burst with heat for him. Not that I would know, I had no idea what it felt like to be in heat yet; I wouldn't be able to experience it until after I shifted into my wolf.

My cheeks blushed slightly as I attempted to battle the feeling, but he caught my reaction, and a satisfied grin took over his mouth.

“You are so lucky!” Willa whispered next to me without an ounce of ill will or envy, gripping my arm excitedly as she looked at my future mate.

I was certain she wasn't the only young she-wolf in the pack who felt the same way. Mating with *the* Beta of the pack, the absolute favorite of our Alpha was the highest feat any of our females could ever achieve, and Ryker had chosen me.

The anxiety returned but I smiled at her, grateful for her sentiment, and focused on the magical stones once more. Thankfully, Ryker's attention returned to the task at hand, and he proceeded to open the two remaining chests.

Rainbows reflected off the swaying lights emanating from the boxes, and when the Hunters turned them on their side, spreading the crystals all along the carved area, they almost appeared to sing. Their delicate clink, clink, clinks, rose in the air while they fell over each other and rolled off, filling the ceremonial walkway to its brim.

Awestruck by the mystical sight, I began walking closer, leaving everyone else behind and pausing only a couple of feet from the entrance. Finally free, the magic in the stones ignited, swaying gold flames rising from them to create a walkway of destiny.

Tears rushed to my eyes with happiness, it was truly a sight to behold. I had waited for this moment for so long.

All I needed to do now was cross the ancient fire and get to the other side without being burned—only the true, deserving descendants of our mystical race could cross without harm. Once I began, the magic flames would search my spirit and rise, encompassing my body to release the truth within, until I arrived at the other end of the path a full, she-wolf.

I couldn't wait for tomorrow to arrive. I'd been waiting what seemed like forever for my life to finally begin...

*Except, you will no longer be joining the Hunters or be part of the human world.* My mind reminded me, tainting the joy coursing through me.

Without thinking, I took one last step forward. Murmurs rose behind me when the sole of my bare foot landed on the swaying flames, and they danced along my toes like playful children, the crystals briefly shifting under my weight.

Suddenly, the fire began to lick my skin, doing something I had never witnessed. Red embers wildly sparked off the golden flames, and they surged, leaping onto my ankle. A loud gasp erupted from my lips the next instant, as I watched the flames turn blue.

Strong arms yanked me out of the fire, cradling me in their protective embrace. “Are you okay?” Ryker, asked, piercing my eyes with his equally concerned and angered gaze.

“I, um... I’m okay,” I answered, trying to calm my racing heart. My gaze curiously fell to the pathway, to find that the blue flames were gone from the crystals, leaving only gold in their wake.

The change had been so sudden, so brief... Had I imagined that?

“Did it burn you?” he asked urgently, and I blinked, glancing down at my foot to find only smooth skin.

When my gaze returned to him, confusion captured my mind. “Why would it burn me? I am the niece of the Alpha.”

“Did it burn you?!” Ryker barked, demanding a straight answer to his question.

“No... I’m fine.”

His anger instantly vanished, a sigh expanding his chest and dropping his shoulders in relief.

Still, I didn’t understand his reaction. “Why did you think the fire would—?”

His lips crashed onto mine, claiming me as his, and my wolf gave in to him, relinquishing our power to him.

“What the hell were you thinking?” he whisper-growled, his mouth still against my lips.

“Ryker, stop. I didn’t—”

“Damn it, Natasha!”

“Sorry, I just wanted to feel it...” I replied, glancing back at him, and saving myself the trouble. I knew how these arguments ended, whatever my reasons, I would always need to submit to the Beta.

“Just wait until tomorrow,” Ryker chided, glancing beyond me toward the horizon, until a fading orange light seemed to illuminate his dark eyes. His mouth lifted into a new smile. “Are you ready?”

His question caught me off guard, and I glanced over my shoulder to find the stunning mixture of deep red, bright yellow, and strokes of orange painting the mountain as the sun hid in the sky, giving way to the rising bright silver moon.

*“No more waiting, Tasha. Tonight, you’ll finally be mine.”*

Ryker’s words from this morning echoed like warning bells as I glanced back at him. He must have noticed the alarm rushing through me because he chuckled, cupping my cheek, and caressing it soothingly with his thumb.

“I know you are nervous, but that’s normal. It’s just you and me from now on, Tasha. Remember this is what we want—a life together as mates, to have lots of cubs to inherit my strength and your beauty, and to continue our race as the Alpha’s heirs. This is good.”

After a peck on the lips, he took my hand and began to walk toward his cabin, tugging me along, but I planted my feet, resisting him. “Wait just a moment, please. I want to—”

“We don’t have to wait anymore, that is the point,” he interrupted, clearly annoyed.

“I know, but—”

“Stop being so dramatic, Tasha,” he growled. “We have waited years for this.” His steps resumed, and he dragged me again with more force.

The unmated females that stood nearby, watched me like I had surely lost my damn mind, resisting the Beta when they

would kill to take my place, but this didn't feel right anymore...

*And two could play this game.*

Pushing my wolf forward, I borrowed from her strength and yanked my hand out of his so hard that he had to sidestep not to fall, freeing myself.

"I said, *wait*," I growled back. "I have to talk to Isis first. She told me to wait here for her and that is what I plan to do."

*Where the hell is she? Is she and our Alpha in the middle of killing each other?*

"She has nothing to do with this!" His displeasure at my disobedience became evident in his now glowing yellow irises. "Your uncle, *the Shadow Born Alpha*, gave you to me, and only *he* has the final word."

His hand tried to wrap around my arm, but I moved out of its way before he could reach me. "I'm not a thing he can just give away, I thought you knew that."

"You are a she-wolf, it's the same. We are mating tonight, end of discussion," he barked, taking a menacing step toward me.

Oh, hell to the fucking no.

A growl surged through my being—my wolf *did not* like that either. Hot, sizzling temper flared inside of us, our anger mixing. "Stop, Ryker! I don't want to mate with you!" I growled, shocking even myself.

"What did you just say?!" If his eyes were glowing before, now they were an erupting volcano, lava flowing from it. "It's too late to change your mind, Natasha. We are going to mate whether you want it or not!"

The clear meaning of his threatening words echoed through the forest, filling me with shock, but most of all, insult. Ryker had never disrespected me like that or treated me that way. Like I was nothing.

Before he could blink again, my hand slammed against his cheek, thrusting his head to the side from the force—my



wolf's claws slicing his skin open in full support.

A vicious, full animal growl ripped from his throat when he looked at me, eyes wild, and for the first time, fear of him gripped me. Ryker's clawed hands clamped around my arms, and he wrenched me toward him.

"No!" I shouted, but before I could slam against his chest, something rammed into Ryker, pushing me clear out of the way.

His body soared backward from the strength, crashing against the cold, hard ground.

Our attacker was so impossibly fast, that my eyes only caught one thing in the darkness falling over us...

Dark, leathery wings.

"Vampires!" I screamed.

# 4

Ryker jumped back on his feet immediately, but he was no longer a man. His massive raven-black wolf snarled, lunging himself at the blurring Vampire. Except, it wasn't just the vicious creature's speed that kept it out of our sight, literal shadows seemed to swirl around it, cloaking its presence.

It was as though the very darkness of night were alive and helping it. Could they also manipulate the night?

Fear crawled like icy vines over my being, and I realized that those creatures were even more dangerous than I'd ever imagined. A vicious snarl also escaped my throat, my canines sharpening as my wolf pushed against my skin with her need to fight the monster, and patches of her white fur burst from my skin.

Adrenaline rushing through me, I tried to jump into the fight to help Ryker—sure he'd been a huge asshole to me, but I didn't want him killed. Unfortunately, I could barely see them anymore, the shadows had completely cloaked them in a swirl of death.

Damn it.

“Vampires!” I yelled again, but no one came. Where were the Hunters? Couldn't they hear me?

Hating myself for not being able to fully shift, I whirled around and ran back into the clearing. “Help! Vampires are attacking—”

Heart slamming against my chest, I watched in horror as the same darkness swirled through the clearing, obscuring the creatures now attacking the Hunters too.

“Get into the cabin, now!” Isis ordered, running full speed toward me.

Yet, my eyes frantically searched for the innocent caught in this fight. “The cubs, the breeders—!”

Her arms caught me before I could even move, and Isis lifted me clear off the ground, running toward our house with me in her arms like a footie ball.

“Stop, we have to help!”

“The breeders and cubs are safe in their houses,” she assured, placing me on my feet and slamming the door behind us. “Yes, even the Omegas,” she added when my mouth opened to ask.

Whirling around, she rushed to the window, peaking through the blinds at the fight outside.

Pulse racing, I walked after her, dread capturing me whole when I noticed the slashes and dripping blood on our hunters, while they slipped in and out of the swirling darkness somehow aiding the Vampires’ attack. “I have to—”

“No. You don’t. I know you want to help but I cannot let you go out there, Natasha. I can’t let anything happen to you. Even if I have to restrain you myself, you are staying here. I’m sorry.”

Legs trembling from adrenaline, breath accelerating out of control, I walked back to the table, pacing the tiny room. I knew Isis, and if she said I wasn’t going anywhere, then not even the Goddess herself would get me out of her sight.

Then something else occurred to me, and I spun on my heels, staring at her. “They were here since the morning,” I gasped. “They have been here all day, watching us and waiting for the perfect time to attack. You said there was no danger, Isis. You said it was nothing, you said we were safe—”

“There *was* no danger this morning. And it *was* nothing,” she assured, seeming troubled by the turn of events. “Something changed,” she added, talking to herself more than to me as her gaze seemed lost in thought. “This is not nothing, this is something else entirely.”

Turning to face me, the anger, frustration, and undiluted concern marring her beautiful features became abundantly clear. She briefly paced too, clearly desperate to go outside herself but unable to leave my side in her duty to protect me.

As she came closer, her eyes fell on my hands, and both sadness and irritation transformed her expression. “Damn instincts to protect,” she mumbled, taking my hands in her, and lifting them to inspect my ripped nail beds.

It was only then that I felt the pain running through my hands and arms from the partial shift. Patches of white fur scattered along my arms, my canines had extended to their full length in my mouth, puncturing my lips, and my spine was on fire.

“It’s okay, baby girl. It’s going to be okay,” she soothed, turning to the closet to pull out the healing potion.

“It’s no use,” I interjected. “My wolf is not going to retreat, not with what’s happening outside.”

“I know.” She slowly nodded. “Drink it anyway.”

Unfortunately for me, when I took the first sip, only a few drops fell on my tongue... “I guess I drank more than usual yesterday.”

Isis cursed, realizing the bottle was empty. “I was going to refill it this evening, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” I assured, because it wasn’t. Normally, the Witch she bought the healing potions from in the human city, only needed to refill the bottle once every three months, neither of us would have expected I would need so much of it this time.

Turning, she grabbed the salve instead and began to carefully spread it over my fingers and nails, needing to take

care of me. I didn't have the heart to remind her of my wolf not going anywhere any time soon.

We sat on the bed for a while, holding hands while I prayed to a goddess that didn't exist for our pack to be safe and survive the Vampire attack. The fight could still be heard outside, and every once in a while, the noises came too close for comfort, but Isis stood each time, guarding the door.

Unexpectedly, all sound disappeared.

Our eyes connected and I jumped from the bed. "What—?"

Motioning for me to remain silent, Isis went to the window, peeking outside. Every inch of her body tensed with what she witnessed, and when she glanced back at me, an onslaught of contradicting emotions captured her eyes. "The Hunters won. The shifters are safe."

Relief as I had never felt in my life crashed against my being, and I fell on my ass on the bed... until I saw Isis marching toward the door. "Wait, where are you going?"

"I'm going to check things outside and find out what truly stopped the fight."

"What do you mean, *what truly stopped the fight*? You just said the Hunters won."

"If those Vampires had come to kill us, we would all be dead." She threw me a conflicting gaze and swung the door open, leaving me there. "Stay here!"

I was so fucking confused, but I walked out after her anyway, stopping in my tracks when I noticed the sacred crystals spilled out of the now destroyed carved walkway, scattering all over the dirt... their ancient magical fire was no longer visible.

"No," I whispered, but the sound of my voice was swiftly overshadowed by the struggling grunts and growls disappearing into the forest as Ivara, Zain, Levon, and Bergen seemed to drag something out of the village and deep into the mountain.

The most concerning part was that it took four of them to contain it.

Isis' voice rose, snapping my attention to the other side, where she adamantly argued with our Alpha. Ryker stood next to him, horrid slashes crossing his chest and the right side of his body, pulling the skin open in a ghastly manner while crimson trails drenched his naked body. Even his neck was torn—a couple of inches more and he probably wouldn't be standing at all. And yet, even as he stood there, his wolf's self-healing had already kicked in, reducing the injuries he'd suffered.

The Vampire that attacked him had truly come for his blood... but why hadn't it attacked me too?

“Get back in the house,” Isis ordered behind gritted teeth as she marched away from them, fuming like I'd never seen her. Her wolfish eyes glowed in an eerie way that said she was holding back from doing something she would later regret.

Going back in was the last thing I wanted, I needed to find out what was going on, yet something had riled up Isis like never before, and I respected her too much to argue with her about it. She would talk to me when she was ready, in the meantime, she deserved time to process whatever was bothering her this deeply.

When I turned to walk back in, my gaze briefly connected with Ryker's, making my heart squeeze with both hurt and disbelief as the memory of the way he'd spoken to me right before the attack echoed in my mind.

Sadness and regret seemed to capture his eyes, but he walked away, following our Alpha to his cabin. The remaining hunters trailed them as I turned and went back home.

“They have a prisoner...”

Isis' words thundered in the tiny cabin, slicing the silence she'd kept for what seemed like forever after our return.

“They, what?” I jolted to my feet. “Is one of those monsters here, in the village? Are the hunters out of their freaking minds?!”

“Not in the village,” she replied without looking at me, thoughtful. “They took him into the mountain.”

My heart hadn't stopped racing since the attack began, but the news made its already frantic beat double its pace. “Why would they keep one of those creatures? They risk more Vampires coming here to save that thing or something, putting our innocent shifters in even more danger!”

Trembling from shock, fury, and confusion, my hands fiercely fisted at my sides, and I immediately realized my mistake. A winded whimper burst from my lips as my still elongated claws effortlessly sliced through my palms, pain shooting up my arms instantly.

“Baby girl...” Isis sighed, coming to my side, and taking my hands in hers to gently pull out my claws. “I'm so sorry, I'm doing a crappy job at protecting you right now, aren't I?” Taking her face towel from the chair, she placed it above my palms and pressed it firmly to soak up all the blood. “That's enough of that topic for tonight. We need to get you to relax so your wolf will retreat, and we can help you heal.”

“But—”

“But nothing. You need to relax and rest; it's almost midnight and you've had more than enough stress for one day.” Gently closing my hands over the towel, she guided me to the table and proceeded to prepare some tea in the kitchenette.

Sadly, she was right, I needed to find a way to relax so my wolf would feel calm enough to let go. Otherwise, I would continue hurting myself every five minutes with her canines and claws—I had already sliced my tongue and lips more than once. Breathing slowly, I closed my eyes and tried to let my body unwind even though I knew it would be impossible...

This was going to be the longest night ever.

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Not even the crickets chirped that night.

In a mountain normally filled with whistling winds, rustling leaves, and rushing rivers there were no sounds to be found. Not even a single one. It was like nature itself knew the gravity of what ensued here and was observing the danger.

It was well into the night, yet my wide-eyed gaze roamed the ceiling tirelessly. Not an ounce of sleep had graced me with its restful presence. Isis' snores, however, bounced off the walls in rhythmic waves, clear proof she wasn't exactly sleeping well, since the only time she snored was after my monthly tortures. It was a sign of stress for her.

She was troubled by this too, as she tossed and turned every now and then, but right now, she was out cold. It seemed exhaustion had finally claimed her, which gave my terrible, terrible plan a chance to work.

"This is a bad idea..." I murmured under my breath as I slowly slipped out of bed. I hadn't exactly changed before going to "sleep", so I tiptoed barefoot toward the door.

Pain rushed through my hands the instant I turned the knob to step outside, and I winced, biting my lower lip not to whimper before successfully exiting the house. My wolf had finally receded, taking her fur, sharp canines, and claws with her, but even though my fingertips had stopped bleeding, the nails were still somewhat loose—the salve taking longer to heal the wounds without the aid of the potion.

Sucking up the pain, I held my breath and stealthily moved through the sleeping village, using the few shifter skills I could access without having fully shifted into my wolf. My steps pushed against the fallen leaves without uttering a single sound thanks to my innate agility.

As I passed the sacred path carved for the fire ceremony, my heart tore with the sight of the once gold, now grey, shattered, and "lifeless" stones thrown all over the clearing. The radiant light and magical energy that had surged from them before were long gone, and magic flames no longer danced from their depths. They were dead, devoid of the special power they'd carried.

What did that mean for me and my wolf?



No. I couldn't dwell on that right now. I just couldn't.

Steeling myself, I trailed forward, heading straight for the site where I'd seen Ivara, Zain, Levon, and Bergen exit toward the forest. With my first sniff of the air, I immediately caught Zein's scent and began to follow the invisible trail he'd left me. Tracking was by far my best ability.

The village disappeared behind me the deeper I went through the hills, the chill of night this high off the mountain capturing my body while I wondered if Isis had realized I wasn't there, but I was on a mission, and nothing was going to derail me. Ivara's footprints might as well have glowed in the night with how clear my eyes perceived them, leading me straight to their hideaway.

My steps halted when the smell of a campfire reached my nostrils several feet ahead, it wasn't yet visible, but my acute hearing caught the voices of two people. Kellan and Barret. I changed directions, winding around their encampment, and approaching from behind until I was close enough to see them, then pressed against the thick trunk of a nearby blue spruce, taking cover.

The both of them sat on a couple of boulders in front of the fire, behind them, stood a run-down cabin that seemed built in the 1800s. The dark logs of its walls were warped and cracked in several places, but it was still sturdy enough to hold the monster they caught. Their Vampire prisoner.

Something touched my ankle then, and I glanced down to find a squirrel trying to smell me. I gently pushed it away with my toe, but it came right back, climbing onto my foot.

"This is not the time, little guy. I'm busy!" I whisper-hissed, shaking him off me, only for it to come running back.

Kellan's head immediately lifted, sensing a new presence, but because I hadn't yet transformed into my wolf, my scent was still a confusing mix of something similar to human and wolf, not to mention, the smell of blood I'd recently spilled would make it confusing for them to place me... hopefully. Oh, and the squirrel. He could probably smell the little guy too.

“What is it?” Barret asked, noticing his partner’s attention roaming the darkness.

“I don’t know, I think there’s a hurt animal around somewhere. I can scent the blood, but it also smells like a wolf.”

“Is it a deer? Maybe the wolf was trying to eat it and it escaped.” They chuckled, returning to whatever they had been doing. “Hey, you want to go see where it is? Maybe we can finish the job and have a snack while we are stuck here.”

“That’s the best idea you’ve had all night.” Grinning, Kellan stood, sniffing the air to pinpoint the location of the hurt animal.

Crap. It was time to use the environment to my advantage.

Picking up the curious squirrel now playing with the hem of my pants, I tossed him high into the air, sending him right across the way to the other side of the campsite.

*Sorry!*

I mean, he was a flying squirrel after all, it was literally what he was born to do.

Kellan’s head snapped straight to where the little guy landed, and he sniffed the air again, the mixing of my blood on the squirrel’s coat and its scent doing exactly what I expected. Standing, he walked into the other side of the forest with Barret trailing him in his excitement about the supposed deer they’d be having as a snack.

Silently gagging at the image of them eating it raw, I swiftly walked around the tree and slipped into the dilapidated cabin they were somehow trusted to guard, silently closing the door behind me. Heart slamming against my ribs, I slowly moved toward the large iron cage in the corner of the room, a single beam of moonlight partially illuminating its interior through the broken roof.

While I trekked through the forest on my way here, I imagined the many horrors I might find, so the instant I entered the makeshift prison, I hardened myself for what I was sure to feel when I confronted the monsters that took my

parents from me. And yet, nothing could have prepared me for this...

The bloodied form rolled toward me, ending directly under the shining light.

“Dear Goddess,” I gasped. “You are human!”

# 5

A million questions went through my mind at once, but before any could be answered, I was already moving. I rushed to the poor man's side, kneeling before the cage that imprisoned him.

"Are you okay?" I whispered so low, not wanting to alert the two idiots outside of my presence, never mind that it was probably the stupidest question I could have ever uttered.

His face was covered in trails of blood gushing from a gash on his forehead, his body sliced ten different ways by wolf claws, while huge, paw-shaped bruises were already forming along his bare chest and arms—the intensity of their colors saying he was bleeding internally.

The human had been beaten by the Hunters within an inch of his life, and every instinct I possessed screamed at me to help him. Every bone in my body said this wasn't right.

Gently, I reached inside the cage, my fingers slowly wiping the blood that dripped onto his eyes so he could open them. Wiping my hand on my linen pants, I gripped the bars and inched closer, continuing to carefully clean him until a ragged moan escaped his lips.

"Shhh. It's okay. I'm here now."

My words caused some lucidity to return to him, and his head bobbed toward me, his eyelids trembling open. Hazel eyes as light as our magical fire crystals glanced back at me, blue specs shimmering along his irises. I had never seen eyes like his. Then again, I had never seen the eyes of a human.

A myriad of powerful emotions filled his gaze the moment he glanced at me, darkening them slightly—disbelief, possessiveness, and even threads of desire. Before I could decide what any of them meant, his eyes closed, his head falling away from me.

“No... Stay with me,” I breathed, low-key starting to panic.

None of this made sense. Why would the hunters attack a human? More importantly, what would a human be doing on the mountain summit during a Vampire attack?

Ryker’s words suddenly slammed into me. *“It felt planned, like an ambush... Someone brought them here...”*

Horror coursed through me, could this be the human calling the Vampires here? That would mean the humans knew about us and were trying to end us. Shaking my head, I rid myself of the absurd thought. We were their protectors, why would they turn against us?

“Was it you?” I asked anyway, trying to make sense of the situation. “Are you the one who brought those monsters here?”

The man moaned again, turning to look at me as my voice brought him out of the daze. He opened his mouth to speak but the blood caught, making him cough.

*Crap!*

Ripping the bottom of my long shirt, I bundled the fabric, swiftly glancing to the door behind us to make sure we were still safe before cleaning the blood away from his lips and jaw. I continued to clean his cheeks and forehead, putting some pressure on the initial wound that had caused the mess.

His features became clear as the crimson stains disappeared under the fabric, and I found myself staring at him in awe.

Humans were so... striking; I’d even dare say sexy.

His dark brows framed a soft yet strong face. The angles of his square jaw made him seem almost molded from clay, while his full lips appeared pillow soft. Unable to help myself, I

traced his lips with my fingertips, a tingling sensation capturing my hand with the feel of him. The human's lips *were* pillow-soft, making my wolf awake inside me in response.

She liked his lips.

Crystalline hazel eyes weakly opened, focusing on me, and I cupped his cheek as a new emotion crashed into them, reflecting in his gaze.

Hope.

He felt hope when he looked at me, and my wolf strongly reacted to it. Her emotions flooded my being.

No. I didn't believe it. There was no chance in this world that those eyes belonged to anyone evil enough to help literal monsters end an entire race. I didn't know what it was about this human, but everything inside me said he was innocent. He didn't belong here, in this cage, being tortured for information. No one did, no matter what mistakes they had made in their life.

"Help me," he croaked, and for once in my life, both my wolf and I were in absolute, undeniable agreement.

"You are safe now. I'm here to rescue you..."

Of course, there was the tiny little fact of me not having the slightest fucking idea how I was going to do that, but baby steps, Natasha. Baby steps.

Taking another piece of fabric, I tossed the drenched one away and began to clean the claw slices along his torso. Based on the tattered strips of cotton scattered around him, I could tell he'd had a shirt at some point, but the hunter's attack had destroyed it.

Though he was weak after being so brutally beaten, his body was anything but frail. He wasn't ripped like Wolf Shifters were, but the muscles of his chest and abs were perfectly hard and defined—his arms built with lean, yet corded muscles. What seemed like drawings extended all along his left arm and part of his chest under the blood, it was the strangest but alluring thing.

“Can you walk?” Yet another incredibly stupid question. I was killing it tonight.

My head snapped to the door when footsteps became louder outside, the flickering sounds of rising flames joining them, followed by the slicing of sharp claws through what smelled like a freshly killed animal. Those idiots had found a deer to eat after all.

“You keep skinning the deer, I’m going to check on our prisoner.”

*What? No. No. No!*

Quickly, I glanced around, looking for a place to hide, but there was none. When I stood, a hand grasped mine, stopping me.

“Don’t—” The man’s words cut off when he coughed. “Don’t leave me...”

“I’m not,” I assured, “but they can’t find me here or I won’t be able to save you.”

His grip loosened, but the torture in his eyes said that letting me go had cost him everything.

Steps grew louder as Kellan walked to the cabin and I rushed to the only place where I could hide, behind the door. A single finger rose to my lips, signaling to the human to please stay silent for both our sakes.

The second Kellan’s hand turned the knob, the man closed his eyes, his head bobbing away from me as he pretended to still be unconscious. My back pressed tightly to the wall, feeling something poke my thigh. Glancing down, I found an old and rusted shovel, then my head snapped up as Kellan walked inside the room.

“How are doing, you piece of shit?” he snarled, kicking the human’s leg through the iron bars, then laughing when a moan of agony escaped the man. “He’s still passed out!” Kellan called back to Barret, then kicked the man again, as though it was fun.

Watching him in disgust, I found it hard to believe that our Alpha and Ryker would allow something like this to happen. Barret and Kellan were idiots, so they would totally do something like this, but Ryker and my uncle couldn't possibly know what was happening here, could they? Our race was created to protect humans, were they truly capable of such cruelty?

The muscles of my jaw viciously clenched when Kellan kicked the man yet again, reopening the wounds that had slightly begun to heal, and drawing more blood. His boot slipped through the bars once more, but before it could stomp his chest, the man's hand snapped up, grasping Kellan's heel with whatever strength he had left.

That was my cue.

Before I could even think, my fingers wrapped around the shovel, and I swung it at Kellan's head with all my might. The rusted metal exploded as it struck the side of his face, not doing as much damage as it should have. Kellan whirled around with a snarl. Unfortunately for him, I had already twirled the shovel around, and swung its wooden handle at his temple the next second, knocking him unconscious from the strike. His massive body crumbled toward the corner, crashing on top of a few tin buckets.

Pure shock struck the human's face as he glanced up at me, clearly not expecting me to attack one of my own.

"Not going to lie, I've been wanting to do that for a while."

A cheeky grin lifted the corner of his lips, unveiling the cutest dimple on his chin, but I had no time to ogle the sexy human, Barret was already on the move with the ruckus Kellan caused.

*Wait, did I just call him sexy?* My wolf stirred, agreeing wholeheartedly.

"What's going on in there?!"

As the door swung open, I jumped and scissor-kicked Barret in the chin, snapping his head back with its force. I



side-kicked him in the chest next, sending him flying back onto the rocks outside. Rushing after him, I spun and swung the shovel's handle at his head before he could even jump to his feet. The growl died in his throat mid-shift as he too dropped to the ground, unconscious.

*Shit. Shit. Shit! What the heck have I done?*

Nobody cared, there was no time for that.

Throwing the shovel away, I ran back into the cabin, finding the man dragging himself up by the iron bars.

"I may not be allowed in their stupid Hunters pack, but I can sure as hell defend a human!" I growled and dropped next to Kellan, searching his pants for the cage's key.

"You sure can, *Meu coração*," the man replied in a language I had never heard, his accent making the words sing with sensuality.

I had no idea what he'd said, but my cheeks flushed all the same. Shaking myself, I yanked the key free from Kellan's belt, and whirled on my knees, unlocking the cage's door.

Once I was inside, I carefully but urgently pulled one of the man's arms around my shoulders and curled mine around his torso. "Can you walk?"

"I guess we are about to find out." His knees partially gave out the moment we stood, but he forced himself to keep going, and I was proud of him for that.

The crisp night air hit his body harshly the moment we stepped out, especially with all the wounds he'd suffered, but even though his muscles shook, he kept going. We stepped around Barret's form, and headed for the forest, yet before we could make it out of there, the sound of rustling and grunts came from inside the raggedy cabin. Kellan was waking up.

If he shifted and came after us, we were toast, because there was only so much hand-to-hand combat one could do with a Wolf Shifter, let alone a freaking Hunter. Isis had trained me to fight, but she couldn't perform miracles.

Urgency squeezing my lungs, I urged the man forward as fast as he could humanly walk, but his injuries were severe, and he had lost too much energy. He was too weak.

*Goddess, please help me...*

Knowing how much was at risk, my wolf pushed with urgency against my skin. This was her purpose, our purpose, protecting humans was the only reason we even existed. We could not fail him—we would not.

*“We can do this, girl,”* I assured her.

More noises came from behind us, and my head snapped toward them, seeing the cabin’s door swing open. We weren’t far enough yet.

Heart crashing against my ribs, I halted and faced the man. “I have to carry you, or we are both dead.”

For the second time, shock filled his eyes, but before he could say anything, I pulled all the strength my wolf could give me and lifted him clear off the ground into my arms.

“Hold on!” I yelled, running as hard and fast as my legs would let me, just as raged-filled growls burst behind us.

Paws struck the earth over and over at our backs, but I didn’t stop. I couldn’t.

The forest blurred before my eyes, but still, I kept going.

Wolf snarls turned to howls, calling on the rest of the Hunters. I pushed harder than I ever thought possible, driven only by my innate need to keep this human, this stranger, safe.

Soon, all sounds of danger were drowned by the quick beating of the man’s heart, the ragged breaths escaping his lips, and the whooshing sound of the blood rushing through his veins. Somehow, all my senses tuned into him, making me acutely aware of every function and reaction his body was experiencing. It seemed so natural, like I’ve been doing it my whole life.

By the time my steps inevitably slowed, we were already down the mountain, and the sun was starting to rise on the horizon, taking with it the cover of night. We were technically

in human territory now, with the national park encompassing the area and filling it with nature trails, bird-watching stations, and even a couple of kiosks that offered cold beverages and snacks for the hikers. Of course, I only knew about the snacks thanks to what Isis had told me about the human park.

The kiosks were still closed, but being so close to the city gave me a false sense of security.

Following the wild song of the river, I neared it, carefully placing the man at its bend. My knees hit the forest floor when the last bits of miraculously summoned energy drained out of me, and I sat on my heels next to him, taking long, restoring breaths.

“You can’t go back now...” The man’s hesitant words made me open my eyes, and I found his back half resting on the boulder while his face and chest glistened with water. He was drinking from the river.

“I know,” I sighed, finally processing the gravity of what I had just done.

“You went against your own kind for me... Why?”

My eyes connected with his, and I slowly shrugged because it should be obvious, shouldn’t it? “It was the right thing to do. I couldn’t leave you there to be tortured and beaten by the Hunters. If I did, it would make me just like them, and after seeing what they did to you, a helpless human, I can’t even imagine calling myself one of them anymore... We are *not* the same.”

It was a bittersweet thing to accept after the word *different* was thrown at me like a slur my entire life, by my uncle. The realization was sobering, to say the least, but as I looked into the crystalline hazel eyes of this stranger, gaze filled with hope and a million other emotions because I had saved him, I knew it was true.

I was *very* different from them.

Gently, his large hand curved over my cheek, and he caressed me with his thumb before reaching for the river. His other hand lifted to my lips, holding water for me to drink.

Grateful for his kindness, I pressed my lips to the edge of his palm and drank the water he scooped for me over and over again. I was glad to see he looked a bit better than he seemed in the cage, his energy returning even as his wounds remained.

Once I was done, I ripped the other end of my shirt and dipped it in the river, bringing the damp fabric to his chest, and beginning to clean his wounds before they could get infected. One by one the strange drawings on his neck, chest, and arm came back to life as I wiped them clean, becoming brighter.

“I don’t understand,” I admitted, glancing at him with confusion. “Why aren’t they washing away?”

An endearing smirk transformed his face, and he looked at me as though I was the most adorable thing. “They are called tattoos, and they are made by injecting ink into the skin. They mean a lot to me, so they are not going anywhere. I chose them for life.”

“Oh.”

My attention returned to his arm, seeing what seemed like swirly vines depicted down his bicep, though I could be wrong since there were so many scratches. I carefully cleaned the wounds there, dipping the fabric into the river again and again until I reached a part that seemed to have a large image. It must have been important because it was framed by the vines that curled along his arm. Sadly, claw marks and jagged skin ran across it, destroying the beautiful ink drawing.

“You should be a nurse.”

A small smile captured my mouth. “I only know how to do this because Isis has been treating my wounds for so long—Isis!”

The gasp that left my lungs was filled with regret, and my eyes closed while I kicked myself for sneaking out of the house. “She doesn’t know where I am, or what happened. She’s going to be worried sick, and—”

“*Vai tudo ficar bem...*” the human spoke in the language I still didn’t understand, causing the strange feeling his sensual accent ignited to rush through me. When he cradled my cheek,

I could do nothing but look at him, my wolf stretching delightfully under his touch. “If you hadn’t done what you did, I would probably be dead right now. So, thank you. Thank you for going against everything you know to save me.”

Sighing, I nodded, but there were still so many questions. “What were you doing so far up the mountain? Those monsters could have hurt you; they could have—”

“You mean, more than the Wolf Shifters did?” A guilty breath left him when pain stained my expression. “Wrong place, wrong time, I’d like to say,” he continued, “but the truth is, I’m a little impulsive.” His nose wrinkled. “A lot, actually.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle. “Yeah, we have that in common.”

The dimple returned to his chin with his smile, and my stomach dipped, my wolf stirring with rousing feelings she shouldn’t have for a man without a wolf. She pushed against my skin, wanting him closer, and I was helpless but lean into him.

Then another thought filtered into my mind. “You know about Wolf Shifters, that I’m one of them, and you are not afraid of me?”

Intensity seized his gaze as he moved closer too, eyes boring into mine as his expression transformed with an emotion impossible to recognize. One that unnerved me, and still, me and my wolf liked it. No one had ever looked at me that way.

“How could I possibly fear you, when you are the woman who brought me back to life.” The man’s breath fanned my lips with each word, making my wolf ache for him.

Speechless by the intensity exuding from him and taking over me, I remained unmoving, while a sizzling heat I’d never experienced spread through my chest and navel. He winced a little as he leaned into me, but the pain didn’t stop him. The next second, his mouth slowly closed over mine, sending my pulse into a reckless frenzy. Lips softer than I could have ever imagined moved against mine in a demanding but gentle way,

claiming them, and igniting my being like Ryker had never done with a simple kiss. He pulled away too soon, and I found myself wanting more—no—needing more.

Unable to think with my wolf's ache for him, I pressed my lips to his, feeling every ounce of my body awaken. His smile brushed my mouth once he cradled my neck, deepening the kiss, nibbling at me, and sending sexy tingles down my already simmering skin. My wolf curled inside of me, the sizzling sensation he created consuming her too.

The human had done what Ryker never had, bring my wolf and me to life.

“What have you done?!” my uncle's voice thundered along the trees.

I jumped to my feet, whirling around to face the entire hunting pack flanking him, all standing as men.

“I saved the life of an innocent man your hunters were going to kill!” I shouted back, not regretting my decision. Sure, there was some questionable behavior in the last few minutes, BUT other than that, I was proud of doing the right thing.

“You stupid, bitch!” Ryker growled and the next second the human stood between us.

He actually jumped in front of me, as though he could protect me with his body from a literal pack of powerful Wolf Shifters. I would have smiled at that, but the sight was terribly frightening. Especially when his wounds worsened with the forced movement to protect me.

“Call her that one more time, and I swear I'm going to rip your balls off and then make you wear them as a necklace!” the human spat, pure, undiluted fury driving his promise. His corded muscles shook from the effort of holding himself back, fists trembling at his sides.

“Are you insane?!” I hissed, pushing him aside until I stood in front of him again, protecting him.

When my eyes returned to Ryker he was being held back by his goons, Barret, and Kellan, who looked like they would

rip me to pieces themselves if they had the chance. Briefly glancing at our Alpha, I realized they weren't the only ones, and knowing what he was capable of—and what he put me through for something so simple as wearing makeup—I couldn't even imagine what he would do to me now.

“You betrayed me!” my uncle raged, his jaw and arms partially shifting. “You gave into the enemy, you pathetic excuse of a Wolf Shifter!” Stepping forward he walked among his hunters, the disdain he tried to hide from me becoming painfully clear. “You are a traitor...”

Those words sliced deeper than anything he had ever done to me.

“Your father would be ashamed of you!” my uncle spat with pure disdain, his statement reverberating over my skin like he'd struck me.

“He's an innocent man!” I yelled back, gesturing to the human. “What the hell is wrong with all of you? Why can't you see that?!” I screamed, tears falling from my eyes because, with that simple statement, he'd succeeded in doing what he'd been trying to do all these years.

Break me.

“Innocent?!” Ryker raged like a madman, shifting into his massive raven-black wolf, and escaping his friend's hold. He began strutting toward me with precision, as though he was hunting his next prey.

With a flicker of our Alpha's finger, the Hunters all began to shift into snarling, rabid wolves, gathering behind Ryker as he led them across the patch of forest that still divided us. A wave of fear crashed into me, and I turned to find the human looking all around us, as though searching for a way out... like he could outrun what was about to happen.

“There is no escape,” I whispered, another tear leaving me. “I'm so sorry. I tried to save you, but I made it worse.” I faced the Hunters again, standing in front of him so he couldn't see the horror that was about to happen.

“Bring them to me...” our Alpha growled, and the shifters’ pace quickened.

“No,” I whispered, walking backward until I bumped into the man’s chest. “Ryker, please. It’s me. Don’t do this. It’s still me... please,” I begged, looking into ire-filled, glowing eyes that saw nothing but the traitor his Alpha had condemned. “Ryker!” I screamed in full panic, trying to snap him out of it to no avail.

I reached behind me and took the kind human’s hand in mine, to at least give him some comfort.

“Whatever happens, you are not alone. I’m with you.” The whisper meant for the innocent man danced in the wind, reaching my uncle’s ears.

Renewed wrath ignited in his glowing eyes with my words. “She chose *them*,” he raged, all sanity leaving him. “Kill her!”

His command echoed in the frigid wind, and Ryker’s wolf lunged straight for me, claws first.

“Aaa—!”

Isis’ colossal brown wolf suddenly burst out of the trees, cutting off my scream as she rammed into Ryker mid-air, her jaws clamping around his neck before they went down in a tangle of claws and growls.

“Isis!” I shouted as the human’s face suddenly appeared in front of me, blocking my view.

“Hold on!” Strong arms embraced me, a second before he jumped.

Leathery dark wings ripped from his back, pulling a ragged moan from him with the pain the action elicited... and a horrified gasp from me. Vigorously flapping, they took us higher into the sky while wolves violently jumped over and over beneath us, their rampant growls and incessant barking slicing through me.

Frantically searching for Isis and Ryker, I glanced below, seeing them tumble into the river—the potency of the wild



waters taking them both with it. “No!”

Struggling to breathe due to everything that was happening, I blinked in utter disbelief into the kind eyes that had deceived me—blue flecks still shimmering as the man glanced down at me. “I don’t understand,” I admitted, my words filled with hurt and anger. “You look like a human. You made me believe...”

Betrayal tore through my voice; my wolf and I had risked everything to save him, and now we had nothing left.

“The others were right,” I bitterly threw at him. “You are *not* innocent... you *are* a monster.” My fists pushed against his chest, beating with more and more force each time, but his hold only strengthened around me.

Muscles jerked along his jaw with my accusation, and a mixture of pain and regret tainted his gaze. “I’m sorry, Natasha. But I *have* to do this... *Sleep.*”

The word echoed in my mind in the strangest way, and a sudden feeling of drowsiness captured my entire being. No matter how hard I tried to fight, sleep took over, until my fists stopped beating him and my eyelids fell close.

The last thing I remembered, was his hand cradling my head onto his chest before complete darkness surrounded me.

# 6

DANTE

Shadow bands swayed all around my body, engulfing it while I used my formidable magic to vanish from outside the warded shifter village, and reappear in the dense forest. My feet firmly met the grassy earth the next instant, and I turned as my darkness receded to find the air trembling with energy.

Bjørn broke the barrier between the physical and ethereal worlds, *blinking* into existence across from me while holding on to both Vanessa and Hannes, to bring them along for the ride.

“I’m going to kill my brother,” Vanessa panted, stumbling toward the ground from the weakness the black magic had forced on her. The Vampire wards had quite literally sucked her life energy.

Thankfully, Bjørn was there before she fell, feeding her his energy to help her recover.

“I’m going to fucking kill D!” Hannes echoed, his growl reverberating with Alpha power through the entire forest.

“Say it a bit louder, Hannes. I don’t think the *Shadow Born Hunters* heard you,” I taunted, arching a brow at him while the darkness seeping from my core extended beyond me, wrapping around the three of them like a mighty shield of *Twilight*, and cloaking them.

“Don’t make me add you to my *blacklist*, Dante,” the Wolf Shifter growled, frustratedly plunging both hands into his hair.

Lips twitching, I focused on fixing the silver cufflinks of my shirt before buttoning the blazer of my custom-tailored suit. “I’d like to see you try to *end me*, iron cub.”

Snorting, Hannes rubbed his face, attempting to calm down, then let his arms drop to his sides. He would never dare lift a finger against me, we were linked by a bond more powerful than any magic that existed in this menial world.

My gaze fell to Vanessa, finding blood dripping from her right arm as well as a few slashes on her back, an accidental consequence of the unexpected fight we’d endured.

“What the hell was my brother thinking? First, he lets the Hunters know we are here, and then he charges through the Vampire wards to jump one of them?” Vane added, both anger and fear for him carving her expression. “We had a plan!”

“That’s the point, Vane. He *wasn’t* thinking,” I assured, sending a wave of healing shadows toward her. They swept over her body, instantly curing the wounds her self-healing eventually would. “Don’t you know your brother?”

“Don’t be an ass, Dante,” she chided, all the while pulling me down to place a kiss on my cheek as a thank you. She smiled afterward, knowing how much I appreciated her smooches.

Picking up the coat she’d left here before we surveilled the shifter village this morning, she shrugged it on and pulled a *donor bag* from the pocket, drinking from the built-in straw. My magic may have healed the visible wounds, but Vane still needed blood to help her venom resurge and heal the internal damage the black magic caused her. Knowing what expected us, she’d brought supplies for her and D.

Hannes’ snorting echoed; he didn’t even have a scratch.

“Big, and tough, Iron Prince,” I taunted, getting a narrowed-eye scowl from him. “I have to give it to you, though. You smacked the shit out of those shifters.”

“I hate to say it, but of all the reckless things D has done, letting himself get caught seems—”

“D had a reason,” I sighed, interrupting Bjørn, because I’d been the only one close enough to realize what triggered him.

“Tell me what Ryker said to her,” Hannes demanded, marching toward me, and getting riled up all over again.

“Unfortunately, I didn’t hear it,” I confessed. “But he put his hands on *her*, roughly pulling her to him... Frankly, I was about to jump him too, D just beat me to it.”

“That’s why my brother snapped,” Vanessa whispered, sadness encumbering her gaze. “Poor Natasha.”

My muscles jolted with the memory of that fucking asshole grabbing her like that, anger coursing through my chest.

“And why we had to attack the other hunters to help him,” Bjørn voiced what we all knew, even when we hated that Vanessa was forced to cross the Vampire ward too, suffering the consequences.

*And* why I had disguised them all with my magic shadows.

The realization sobered all of us, and we turned to glance toward the summit of the mountain, where D was most likely a prisoner now... dying within the Vampire wards.

My eyes remained closed as I concentrated on feeding off the power the cover of night had provided my darkness. Unfortunately, the sun had already begun to rise on the horizon. Focusing only on the remnants of *Twilight within*, I strived to keep myself charged because something told me D would truly need my help.

Not that I doubted the power a *Newborn Vampire Ancient* had, not for a second, but if he let himself be overpowered by those assholes *and* be imprisoned under the black magic designed to kill someone like him, chances were he needed help. That suspicion I was keeping to myself, of course. The last thing I wanted was to aggravate Vane’s nerves more than they already were.

The constant sound of her boots crunching against the grass as she paced would have irritated any sound mind, thankfully, this bunch was anything but sound. Instead, I used the rhythm as a soothing time-keeping tool while we waited for Bjørn to locate D's energy.

He sat against a tree a few feet from us, focused on sensing the energies beyond this physical world until he could recognize the one we needed. He was a master at that, so we let him be. Meanwhile, Hannes' innate grunts mixed with his every breath. The inability to help D or know what was happening to Natasha was eating him alive.

Being so close, yet so far from her after we had waited this long was no easy feat for any of us to overcome. Power impatiently expanded and retracted from me, echoing his grunts, while we stayed within the cover of my shield and the impossibly tall pine trees of the *Crystal Glow Mountains*.

I hated this damn place.

I hated it with every fucking ounce of my being.

"I got them!"

We all jumped to our feet with Bjørn's announcement.

"Them?" Vanessa gasped, and he nodded.

"He's bringing *her*." His gaze clouded with concern when he looked at me. "D needs you."

Urgency slammed into me with his words, and I whirled toward the opening of the tree line, thrusting my arms forward. Bands of shadows surged from my hands, hurtling toward the sky, and I frantically searched the air for the flying Vampire. The *Twilight* filled my being, connecting our minds the next instant, and giving me D's exact location.

"*I got you...*" My statement resounded in his mind, and his relief reached me just as the darkness wrapped around them mid-air. I took over for D, feeling his wings slack against my hold when I pulled them toward the forest, guiding them down carefully.

The first sensation of Natasha's body enveloped by my magic violently tightened my gut, it almost felt like touching her skin. Nevertheless, I didn't let the feeling making my entire body prickle with the need for her distract me. There was nothing more important than keeping her safe.

D landed firmly on the grass once I let go, and his wings retracted into his back, carrying an unconscious Natasha in his arms.

Tensing at the sight, we all rushed toward them, waiting for an explanation while Hannes' pissed off glower resurfaced.

Vane also glared at D, yet none of us dared say a word or move a muscle until he carefully placed the resting beauty on the soft grass. My attention instantly went to her, noticing the signs of pain that marred her otherwise beautiful features.

Was she hurt?

Leaving the others to argue, I knelt next to her, lifting a hand to her cheek. The true feeling of her skin robbed me of breath, and my eyes fell closed as longing overwhelmed my entire body.

Natasha was finally with us, and soon, she'd know she was mine.

"Damn it, D. You had me worried sick! Why the hell would you do that?" Vanessa whisper-hissed behind me.

"Vane, I know you are mad, but I had—"

"Like I said, he wasn't thinking," I replied, letting my gaze inspect every inch of Natasha's form, searching for the injury that caused her such pain.

"Didn't you see him grab her?" he snapped at me. "I had to do something before that asshole—"

"D doesn't stick to plans, he reacts," Hannes grunted, cutting off D yet again, which I found comical because he was the same way. Though his actions usually extended from his temper, not from lack of prudence.

A frustrated growl left D. "Let me explain!"

“It’s not his fault. He can’t help himself,” Bjørn defended, as he always did. Of all of us, he was most certainly the fatherly figure—never mind that he barely looked twenty-seven. Lucky Fae.

While I continued searching for injuries, I absentmindedly swirled my cloaking magic in a wide circle now encompassing all of us, my shadow shield hiding not just our physical presence from the Hunters, but our scent, and sound as well.

“Can’t you at least try to stick to a plan for once?” Hannes added.

“I don’t care about the freaking plan, Hannes,” Vanessa scolded the Wolf Prince, glancing at her brother. “Did you really have to go and get yourself captured? On purpose, no less? *Idiota*.” The insult burst out of her mouth in their native Portuguese language, which said how truly scared she’d been for D. “You almost gave me a heart attack.”

Noticing Natasha’s nails bloodied and lifted from her fingertips, I held her hands in mine, sending a healing wave through her while my thumbs caressed her soft palms. The blood disappeared before my eyes in an instant, leaving behind healthy, pink skin.

“Sorry, Vane, but if I hadn’t, he’d—”

“Listen, I know you were restless, we all were,” Hannes pressed, “but we had to wait until tomorrow, D. We *had* to. Couldn’t you stop Ryker from grabbing her a different way? Compel him with your Vamp juju or something?”

“He was going to force her to mate with him, you fucking idiot!” D barked, his last nerve irritated.

Every single inch of my body tensed with his revelation, and darkness instantly surged within my eyes, fully engulfing them. I gently let Natasha’s hands go, slowly standing to my full height and facing D.

“He, what?” Dark magic slithered through my words like an arctic breeze that swept over the others, chilling them.

“She flat out told him she didn’t want to mate with him,” D explained, blood engulfing his eyes and turning them

crimson with the memory. “She even slapped the shit out of him, her claws making him bleed, but that only enraged him more. He forcefully grabbed her, and I wasn’t about to let him have his way with her. I was getting Natasha out of there, even if it was the last thing I did. Plan be damned,” he seethed. “If you had seen the fear capturing her beautiful eyes as his filthy hands landed on her...”

The muscles of his jaw twitched with rage, and the gravity of D’s words cut through all of us.

Vane’s appalled gaze connected with Bjørn’s before she rushed to Natasha’s side, making sure she was visibly okay.

My shadow shield trembled along the boundaries like an earthquake, my own body quaking from ire in response. Tendrils of darkness violently jerked out of my being with the viciousness it ignited in me. I expected the others to take a cautious step back, but they didn’t even move an inch. Not even when my darkness was the only magic that could easily consume them, their supernatural powers be damned.

The surging darkness begged me for an order, for the simple command to *destroy*...

Closing my eyes, I grounded my being in the *Twilight*, forcing myself to regain control. Although that was the last thing I wanted to do, I could never let myself go there; I couldn’t let myself become darkness itself.

Natasha needed me to be *me*. I had to remain the man I fought so hard to become for her.

Nevertheless, my reaction was not the only visceral one. A wave of renewed anger visibly slashed through Hannes. His claws protruded, his nostrils flared, his irises glowed, and each muscle jolted with the strength it took for him not to shift and go into absolute *beast mode*, ripping that filthy excuse of a shifter called Ryker to pieces. Hannes’ Alpha growl almost reverberated through the forest, were it not for me concealing us right now.

Of the three of us, Hannes was undoubtedly the one with the worst temper, but frankly, I would gladly help him



obliterate that asshole.

“You want to rip Ryker to pieces, don’t you?” D asked us both through sharpened fangs, and a unified, vicious growl tore from our throats in unison. “My feelings exactly... but it’s going to have to wait. Besides, he has his hands full right now.”

“I get it, D. I would have forsaken the plan too, but right now, we need to get out of here,” Bjørn reminded, causing Hannes, D, and I to take a step back from our fury and focus on the present situation.

“She got hurt?” Vane asked, calling my attention back to Natasha, and the harsh claw marks on her eye.

I’d noticed that too, but my magic hadn’t been able to heal it, which told me it occurred too long ago for my ability to reach the wound’s core.

D’s head shook faintly, still trying to understand. “It seems to have been left on her many years ago, and it never fully healed. I don’t know how, but what troubles me the most is that it was made by—”

“Vampire claws...” Bjørn whispered as he stepped closer to me, utter disbelief clouding his eyes while he glanced at Natasha. “Who would dare to touch her? Specially knowing—?”

“No one,” Hannes seethed in a barely humanoid voice, still trying to contain his werewolf. “No one would fucking touch a hair on her head knowing the truth.”

“Does the Viscountess know about this?” I asked, trepidation capturing my every muscle.

“If she does, she’s never shown me,” D confessed.

“Then I don’t want to be there when she finds out,” Vanessa dreadfully exhaled, echoing all of our thoughts. “Did she faint?” she added when her gaze fled over Natasha, and a new bout of guilt clouded D’s expression.

Shit. We all knew what that meant.

“Tell me you *did not* use compulsion on her,” Vane scolded.

An annoyed grunt left her brother, and he pinched the bridge of his nose. “I had no choice, Vane. She was fighting me, in the air, and I hadn’t recovered yet. I was struggling to fly us away as it was.”

That inevitably reminded us of his injuries. I felt like an ass for not offering to help heal him sooner.

Our attention finally focused on the gruesome slashes across his body, some even cutting through his *sacred bond* tattoo, and a new bout of concern engulfed us. Vane immediately stood, pulling out a *donor bag* from her jacket and handing it to D.

The instant his fangs pierced it, and the blood caressed his tongue, literal life returned to him—as it did for all Vampires. As expected, the nourishing blood incited his venom to take it from there, and the multiple claw slices left along his chest and arms immediately started to heal. The venom surged through his veins, regenerating his cells, and causing a bout of vigor to visibly crash into his being.

Still connected to him through my darkness, I felt it all as though it were my body regenerating. It was the oddest thing, yet undeniably familiar to what I experienced with the power of the *Twilight*.

Before he could dispose of the empty bag, Vanessa threw her arms around him, hugging her brother fiercely. Her emotional embrace told us everything she hadn’t said out loud. She had been terrified for D’s life. He probably felt like an asshole for putting her through that... but I knew he would do it again if it meant saving Natasha.

His mouth pressed to her cheek, leaving a hard and loud kiss that made her chuckle. “Don’t worry, little sis. After everything we have been through, I’m not going away that easily.”

A small smile curved her lips, though concern still churned in her dove-grey eyes. Vane pulled another donor bag from her

jacket.

“You love me,” D taunted, making us all chuckle while he bit into the extra bag.

It was hard to deny that I, too, was relieved to see D was well. Not that I would tell him that.

My attention returned to Natasha, and Hannes and I crouched at either side of her—his wolf receding by finally being so close to the object of his affliction.

“How did you find her, anyway? How did you get out to look for her if they trapped you?”

Bjørn’s question caused D’s mouth to tilt into his signature crooked grin as I glanced at them over my shoulder. “Actually, she found me before I could even try to get out of there. She broke me out.”

“Now, *that’s* my kind of woman,” Bjørn teased, receiving a possessive glare from both Hannes and me while D just snorted.

Bjørn loved to mess with us.

“Are you serious?” Vanessa’s voice was filled with equal elation and disbelief.

“Yep. And she kicked the crap out of two of the Hunters while she was at it. Nothing made me prouder.”

“That’s my girl...” Vanessa grinned.

“Of course, she thought I was human when she saved me, so...”

*Cazzo!*

Bjørn cringed while Vane cursed under her breath. Hannes and I exchanged a *fuck me* glance because all of us knew the implications of that. This had just gotten more difficult.

Coming to our side, D briefly crouched next to Natasha, gently caressing her cheek before placing a soft kiss on her lips. “Arnoldt is wrong. Your father would be so damn proud of you...” he murmured, finally taking his place before her.

It was time.

“Shall we—?” The question died on my tongue when undiluted darkness surged out of the deepest hollow of my core towards Natasha’s sleeping body.

*No! Not again...* My heart stopped beating.

“Dante!” Vanessa’s gasp of horror echoed behind us while D and Hannes instantly became rigid at my side, yet it was too late.

Bands of formidable, life-consuming power curled around her body, slithering over every beautiful inch of her. Eager to find her truth, they swirled, engulfing her, sensing her, discovering her while I fought the devastating memories awakening in my mind.

*Her screams. Her soft olive skin turning into grey ashes. Her face rapt with terror as my love for her ended her life...*

Briefly shutting my eyes, I pushed my haunting past aside before it could undo me all over again, and forced myself to look at Natasha, praying to Hecate that it would not happen again.

And then it all stopped, the shadows returning to my core without leaving a single smear on Natasha’s skin. She was still alive.

*“Thank you, Goddess.”*

A collective breath of relief left the others while I battled the dangerous emotions still coursing through me.

“It’s done. It’s her, Dante...” D assured as though he’d never had a doubt, but the remnants of the sliver of fear they’d experienced were still present in his and Hannes’ expressions.

“It’s done, Dante,” Hannes confirmed.

“It is done,” I concluded. Natasha was finally mine.

With the three of us protectively surrounding her, D nodded, it was time to get this over with because Bjørn was right, we needed to get the hell out of this damn mountain.

I leaned closer, letting my thumb caress the length of her cheek before I pressed my lips against her temple, the Ancient Greek words of my whispered spell working their magic.

Natasha's eyes fluttered open.

## NATASHA

Soothing and familiar, the sounds of the forest danced into my ears as lucidity returned to me, and my senses immediately became alive.

A myriad of enticing aromas swirled into my nostrils while the drowsiness receded. Fresh cut cedar, cinnamon, and mint followed by bright citrus, rosemary, and persimmon; and the strongest one of all, the one that had been seared in my nose as I fell asleep—pine, wild orchid, and smoked vetiver.

The three powerful, yet subtle masculine scents engulfed me, bringing me out of the darkness, and enticing my whole being. My wolf contentedly curled inside me, feeling the same serenity I experienced with the aromas.

Finally able to pull my eyes open, I welcomed the light, my gaze focusing on the faces slowly appearing. Three men crouched around me, equally sensual and striking grins stretching their lips as they watched me.

Confusion trickled through me when I noticed the man to my left lift my hand to his lips, placing a meaningful kiss on my knuckles. The bright citrusy scent of rosemary and persimmon oozed from him into my nose more fluently now, rousing everything inside me, especially my wolf. His dark, forest-green eyes and sleek obsidian hair contrasted with his lightly tanned skin, an alluring combination I had never seen.

My confusion swiftly changed once I was captured by the intimidating darkness accentuating his presence. The little

hairs on the back of my neck stood on end just as I realized that bands of shadow exuded from his core, flowing around us as though they were alive.

Startled, I pulled my hand away and staggered back without knowing where I was, slamming my back into a large tree. “Ouch!”

“The name is Dante, *Cuore mio*... Dante, *Lord of Twilight*,” he offered, almost singing with the accent consuming his words and making my stomach flutter.

“She doesn’t give a shit, Dante,” the man to my right growled, and my attention immediately flew to him.

I would recognize that type of growl anywhere... He was a Wolf Shifter.

“Are you okay?” the shifter offered, his voice settling into a deep yet kind tenor, and only then did I realize that a German accent engulfed his words.

Was he from my uncle’s original pack too? Something told me the answer was no.

“I, um...” I mumbled, unable to do much but stare at him.

He wasn’t like the *Shadow Born* shifters I knew. Instead of raven-black eyes, he had cyan-blue irises, and his hair wasn’t at all dark. It was light brown with natural golden strands throughout, like slowly dripping honey. The fresh-cut cedar, cinnamon, and mint scent was definitely his, and my wolf pushed against my skin instantly, wanting me to sniff him...

If it were up to her, my nose would be nuzzling his neck by now.

Blinking the urge away, I swallowed. “I’m fine, I think.”

A sensual grin stretched his rosy lips, making me dizzy. It was like he knew the effect his presence, his scent, had on me and my wolf. “I’m glad to hear that. I’m Hannes Re—”

“Okay, guys that’s enough. You can *swoon her* later,” A woman interrupted behind him, pushing everyone aside to reach me. “What she needs is room to breathe... Let me help

you, sweetie.” Her hand extended to me, and as I looked up at her, something in her grey eyes told me I could trust her.

The moment I got to my feet, I swayed and had to hold on to her not to fall on my face. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine, I promise,” she offered with an honest smile, and I felt compelled to smile at her too, grateful for her kindness. “Long introductions short, my name is Vanessa. And the *Three Stooges* over here are Mr. Temperamental, Mr. Cocky...” she began, gesturing to Hannes and Dante respectively, “and Mr. Impulsive... or D for short.” She snickered at her own joke, gesturing to the third man now behind her.

The second my eyes fully focused on him, the events of the last few hours slammed into my memory, making it all so painfully real.

“He’s a Vampire!” I yelled in warning, pulling the human girl back with me to protect her.

Regret flashed in his crystalline hazel eyes, and he shook his head, the pleasing scent of pine, wild orchid, and smoked vetiver exuding from him when he stepped closer. “Natasha, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“I risked *everything* to save your life!” I accused, hurt, offended, and fucking pissed off before my eyes widened with more flashing memories. “You kissed me!” Dread replaced everything else. “And I kissed you back! Oh, Goddess, I kissed a Vampire!”

I expected the notion to make me nauseous, instead, my cheeks flushed with the sensation awakening from his soft, full lips on mine.

“You guys kissed already?” a man standing in the back, who I couldn’t see, asked the Vampire—or D, as the girl called him. “You got game, bloke. High five.”

“Bjørn!” everyone scolded.

“Also, sorry to be the one to tell you this, dearie, but she’s a Vampire too,” the hidden man added in the strangest accent. “And I’m one as well—well, sort of.”



My attention returned to the girl I was clutching to my side in an effort to protect her. *Shit!*

Heart racing, I pushed her away from me, realizing none of them were human. Three Vampires, a *Lord of Twilight*—whatever that meant—and a treacherous Wolf Shifter, those were my saviors?

Or my *captors*...

What the hell was happening here?!

My startled gaze snapped to the shifter. “How could you betray our race like this? Betray humanity? How can you mix with Vampires after everything they have done? They feed from innocent humans and make them their blood slaves!”

Granted, I was getting a bit hysterical, but after everything that had happened, who could blame me?

Seeming deeply troubled by my statement, the shifter opened his mouth to explain, but before he could, a more frightening memory crashed into my mind.

Dear Goddess... No.

“Isis!” I gasped, true fear clinging to my being with the image of her falling into the wild river while fighting Ryker. “I have to find Isis!” Whirling around I rushed the swaying wall of shadows that surrounded us, running toward the forest.

Massively ripped arms caught me, pulling me back inside the strange darkness barrier. The shifter pressed me against his iron-hard chest, his hot breath fanning my skin when he pressed our cheeks together.

“Calm down, Natasha,” he urged, his lips so close to mine that my wolf was painfully aware of it. “You are going to alert the *Shadow Born* of our location.”

“Let me go!” I snarled, even when having his arms around me this way made my stomach dip, sending tingles down my body. A fierce growl escaped my throat, and I jerked in his hold, not letting my wolf’s attraction to this stranger distract me from what was truly important.

Nothing mattered right now but one thing, finding Isis.

Bucking my hips against him, I threw my body forward to get him off me, or at least I tried. His body didn't budge a muscle. Instead, my ass slammed against his groin, and his hold on me tightened, a guttural, sensual sound ripping from deep within his chest.

"If you do that again, we are going to have a *special* kind of problem, *Meine Prinzessin*," he grunted in my ear.

Heart slamming against my chest, I pushed aside the need awakening in my wolf. What the hell was wrong with her? This wasn't the freaking time for this!

Unable to give up on Isis, because she would *never* give up on me, I jerked violently in Hannes' hold, kicking into the air wildly.

The others all rushed toward me, to help contain me. Too freaking bad. My foot connected with someone's groin, and the man they called Bjørn gripped himself, falling on his knees before tipping sideways on the grass, his face hidden under the large hood.

"Bloody hell!" he coughed. "She's feisty, this one."

"Get your hands off me. Isis needs me!" My next kick snapped D's face to the side, and he cradled his nose, blood instantly seeping through his fingers.

"I'm so sorry, girl. I promise we are not the enemy here, but we can't let you go, or they *will* kill you." Vanessa moved me faster than I expected, successfully capturing my legs in a freakishly strong grip.

In the midst of struggling to calm, reeling with fear for Isis, and not being able to fully process what was happening, I prayed to the Goddess to protect Isis. I knew she was a survivor, a self-made Alpha, and wouldn't go down without a fight, but it still killed me that I didn't know where she was or what had happened to her.

*Please, Moon Goddess, help her. I can't lose Isis too...*

Tears stung my eyes as I looked into Vanessa's, the truth in her words beating my will into submission until the fight slowly died inside me. Regardless of how messed up things

had always been, the *Shadow Born* were my family, the only family I had ever known. Still, Vanessa was right. If the Hunters found me, they would not hesitate to kill me... it was my uncle's command after all.

I shut my eyes fiercely, stopping the tears wanting to escape.

“Forgive me, but we need to get out of here, *now*.” Dante's soothing voice reached me, calling my attention to him. His pained green eyes held mine as he cradled my cheek. “*Dormire, Cuore mio...*”

Strange tingles suddenly surged from his touch, spreading through every inch of me. Soon, drowsiness crawled over my body, capturing me in its sweet sleep until only darkness surrounded me.

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Sounds like I had never heard in the mountain, made their way into my ears as sleep leisurely left my being this time.

Blaring horns burst through the air, accompanied by a multitude of hurried steps against a hard ground, rustling bags, chatting voices, and even the playful banter and laughter of small children. Calm waters also seemed to churn in the distance, even ringing, the mishmash offered by the chaotic yet ecstatic atmosphere bringing me closer to the light.

Unlike the last time I awoke from sleep, my senses were sharp, grounded, and no tiredness was left behind on me.

The softest sensation ever wrapped my body like a giant hug, and I opened my eyes to find I was swaddled in what appeared to be layers upon layers of fluffy fabric. Warm, soft, silky fabric. Shifting my gaze, I found my hand happily resting on the pillow next to me, which just like the one under my head, might as well be made of feathers. I couldn't help but caress the pillowcase, enjoying its luxurious feel. I had never felt anything like it.

Turning on the mattress that might be an actual cloud, I began to inspect my new surroundings. The huge bed beneath me was a far cry from my twin-sized one with a flimsy sheet

and a flattened pillow that had definitely seen better years. Its pillowy top molded to my body with every movement, almost making me want to cuddle up beneath the warm blankets and never get up again.

Unfortunately, I had to do it. I needed to face the reality of what happened and figure out not only where the strange Supernaturals had brought me, but also, find a way to escape.

As I awoke this time around, I remembered everything right away. No confusion clung to my mind, no lethargy, just clear, crisp memories of the worst day of my life. The day when the only pack I had ever called family turned on me.

*“Kill her!”*

My uncle’s voice still reverberated in my ears, and I suddenly found it difficult to breathe.

The image of Ryker’s wolf lunging at me at his Alpha’s command, after *everything* we’d shared, ripped my heart in a way I suspected would never mend. Each growl, each stalking stride he made toward me with glowing eyes filled with rage, contrasted harshly with the way his arms had wrapped around me a million times. The way his lips used to claim mine—so caringly, so possessively, like I was the only thing he would ever need to survive.

For so long, the only thing I’d truly longed for had been to belong. To show my uncle, the only true family I had left, that I was worthy of his love. To show Ryker and the pack that I could be someone...

Now, I was nothing.

Sitting up, my hands flew to my face as what felt like acid began to inundate my eyes, fingers trembling against my eyelids in an attempt to keep the pain at bay, but I failed. Treacherous tears fell from my eyes, the implacable emotion that accompanied them scorching its way up my throat in the process. My shaking hands curled around the soft fabric that covered my body, gripping it tightly as I held on, and for the first time in my life, true hate filled me.

I hated my uncle for never really caring about me, while still making me believe that one day I could earn his love.

I hated Ryker for turning against everything we had once promised to each other. For deceiving me so easily and treating me like I wasn't worth his respect. For not trying to fight his wolf's instincts or his Alpha's command to end my life.

I hated myself for believing them...

The worst part was that by taking me from the mountain against my will, the strangers had forced me to leave Isis behind, and now there was no way of knowing if she was dead or alive. The wild rushing of the river as her wolf plunged into its waters with Ryker's replayed before my eyes, their struggling sounds ringing in my ears. I shut my eyes fiercely, attempting to breathe.

I hated the strangers too.

Agony tore through my soul at the mere thought of Isis' life being lost because of me, of her sacrifice to save me... because I wasn't worth her life.

Bitterly, I swept the tears off my face and swallowed the pain that threatened to destroy whatever was left of me, because now, without Isis, I was truly alone. I had nothing.

Wiping my palms on the heavy comforter, I forced myself to regain control, and guided my attention back to my immediate reality and "peculiar" surroundings. Pushing the fluffy cover aside to free my legs, I noticed that I no longer wore the linen shirt and pants that were the pack's standard clothing.

Instead, a matching pair of pink, fuzzy shorts and an oversized top of the same material covered my body. The cozy fabric caressed my skin, but I wasn't sure how to feel about a stranger undressing me and dressing me back up like a human doll.

Also, it was fair to say that was probably the least of my problems right now.

Taking a steeling breath, I glanced at my surroundings beyond the sumptuous bed where I sat. A gasp escaped me. My eyes couldn't instantly find the end of the space, making the room easily the size of the pack's communal dining room.

Soft hues of lilac, grey, and light cream spread over the entire space, including the dividing wall that faced me. A large fireplace made of smooth grey slabs stood in its center, extending from floor to ceiling as a soft fire swayed inside it, keeping the room perfectly toasty. A large painting of a pastel-colored forest I shouldn't recognize hung from the stone over the mantel, yet it somehow seemed familiar.

Double bookcases in a whitewashed wood framed the fireplace on both sides, filled to the brim with books while two large, cozy-looking chairs before it tempted me to sit and enjoy a read. I'd never had the opportunity to read a real book—other than the picture ones Isis used to teach me how to read when I was a child.

With a silent plea from my soul, my feet touched the plush carpet, each step taking me toward the bookcases, but something stopped me before I could get there.

Eyes widening, I slowly turned toward the floor-to-ceiling windows that encased a wall-wide balcony to my right. The wall of glass, however, was not what stopped me in my tracks, but rather the magnificent view proudly displayed through it. Before I realized what I was doing, I rushed up the two steps that took me to the balcony, swinging its doors wide open.

The second I stepped off the carpet and onto the cold tile, the unusual, yet wonderful noises that filtered into my ears when I first awoke returned with relentless force—the chaos, the laughter, the children...

“The city!” I breathed, gripping the steel railing at the edge of the terrace as my heart pounded madly within my chest, almost bursting out of me. “I'm in the city...” I repeated in disbelief.

And still, the sight was nothing like I'd ever imagined or expected it to be. Nothing like the little town at the skirt of the *Crystal Glow Mountains* in Colorado.

A dazzling forest of red, yellow, and orange trees spread below me as the sun appeared to begin setting in the sky, though many were already losing their pretty leaves. However, this was not like the forest where I'd lived all of my life.

Perhaps, it wasn't a forest at all.

The innumerable rounded trees that painted the land seemed to gather around a large, peaceful lake, but they were all perfectly contained within a concrete jungle. A multitude of grey buildings rose around its boundaries, reaching for the sky like they wanted to touch it. Light reflected off some of the towers, making it seem as though they were made of glass.

Buildings of all sizes stretched before my eyes in every direction, including the one I was in, forming cluster after cluster, and occupying every single possible inch of land they could find. My eyes fell on a blueish rooftop to my left when the chilled breeze wrapped me in a welcomed embrace. Its pointy towers reminded me of the castles in the picture books from when I was a child.

Somehow, despite the heart-wrenching emotions that churned inside me, lighthearted happiness slipped through once I glanced below. For the first time in my life, I was no longer on top of the human world, I was part of it.

Throngs of people walked the streets, somehow doing it without bumping into each other. Some dressed in all black, talking on the phone while they walked faster than anyone else—clearly in a hurry to get to where they needed to be. Others casually strolled across the road, holding bags, and drinking from the paper cups they held while wearing vibrant hats and scarves. A group of young girls, around my age, laughed as they walked together into the colorful trees, and several businesses framed the buildings around me. It all felt so surreal.

Humans. Real humans... and I was so close to them.

So close that my pulse began to race uncontrollably, and my wolf became restless with hope and excitement. She was eager to join them, her renewed duty to protect them becoming fiercer than anything I had ever felt from her. My wolf's joy

spread through me at the sight, a feeling I thought I would no longer get the chance to feel, but now rushed freely throughout my being.

“*Central Park* is gorgeous, isn’t it? I totally love *New York City* in the Fall.” The feminine voice startled the crap out of me.

I whirled around to find Vanessa snuggled with a coffee cup in the chair a few feet from me. No threat exuded from her, my instincts said there was no danger, but it was too late. My wolf pushed to the forefront, ready to defend me from the unknown “attacker”, her claws ripping through my fingertips in reflex and drawing blood.

“Aaah,” the pain-filled moan escaped my lips as I cradled my hands to my chest, bending forward. The joke was on me and my wolf, knowing that even if the Vampire before me attacked, I couldn’t exactly defend myself from her like this.

“Shit!” Vanessa gasped, dropping her cup, and rushing to my side. “I’m so sorry, girl. I didn’t mean to scare you. I-I thought you knew I was there. I’m sorry.” She tried to hold my hands, but I stepped away from her.

“Don’t touch me,” I warned, letting my wolf’s growl seep through my voice as I tried to hold on to the hate I’d felt for them not two minutes ago—for taking me away from Isis.

Pain filled her eyes and she nodded, taking a step back too. “Of course. Forgive me.”

The hurt in her voice almost made me regret my outburst. Almost. Still, even if she looked like an innocent human, she was a *very* dangerous monster. A Vampire. Although, in a messed-up way, she and the others had saved my life, I didn’t know who they were, or if I could trust them.

“You didn’t say you were here,” I reluctantly added in a calmer voice, “and I didn’t see you.”

Her confused eyes settled on me. “Yeah, but you are a Wolf Shifter. You have heightened senses and stuff. Didn’t you sense me here?”



Well, crap. She had a point. What the hell happened to my senses? I hadn't smelled the stench of Vampire nearby and I definitely didn't sense a dangerous monster.

Reality fell on me then, and I glanced at her, mystified. Vanessa didn't smell like the vile creatures described to me my entire life, did she? No. She smelled like wild berries and vanilla, a delightful combination. She didn't look deformed or cursed either... she looked like a normal person, just like I did.

Thoughtful emotions danced over her face while she watched me in silence, as though maybe she knew what I was thinking. Perhaps she'd once gone through the same struggles.

Blinking away from her all-knowing gaze, my attention briefly went to the autumn-painted forest before us, the one she'd called *Central Park*, and I realized that even if I'd tried, I wouldn't have been able to notice anything other than the magnificence that surrounded me.

"I think my senses were overwhelmed by... everything," I confessed, feeling my wolf retreat—she'd also realized Vanessa didn't pose any danger to us. "I was too busy admiring the city."

A compassionate smile curved her lips and she nodded. "Believe it or not, I know exactly what you mean." She tried to reach for my hands again, but I took another step away from her.

"I haven't forgotten who you are," I warned, resentment filling my statement. "Or what your friends did to me, forcing me unconscious. I may be hurt, but I can still defend myself. And I will rip the shit out of you if you even try—"

"Understood," she assured, lifting her hands in surrender as a mixture of guilt and concern painted her features. "I'm not against you, Natasha. None of us are. We just had to save you, whatever it took. I swear we would never do anything to harm you."

Sincerity flowed from her words, messing with my conviction as she looked into my eyes. Frowning, I straightened, trying to make myself look tougher than I felt at

that moment. “Are you using that mental thing you Vampires do to make me trust you?”

Once again, she appeared confused by my words, until suddenly her eyes widened. “You mean, compulsion? No! I would *never* use that on y—wait! Does that mean you believed me?” She grinned, suddenly static. “We are so going to be besties!” Vanessa squealed, stepping forward to hug me.

“Vanessa! What the hell did you do to her?” a male voice roared from behind her, but this time, I knew exactly who it was.

D, the man who deceived me.

## 8

Rolling her eyes, Vanessa dropped her arms before she could reach me, turning to face him. “Calm down, D. I didn’t do anything to her. I was just going to hug her.”

An incredulous look briefly crossed his hardened features. “You can’t hug her, Vane. She doesn’t *know you* yet.”

“Right. Well... I didn’t hurt her.”

“I can smell her blood,” he seethed, walking toward us along the balcony that appeared to wrap around the entire floor of the building.

“Oh, that. I accidentally scared her, and her claws came out.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose as though he was trying to muster some patience, but it clearly failed him. “I gave you one job, little sis!” he raised a single finger. “You just had to stay here and take care of her until she woke up, instead you made her claws come out?!”

“Oh, my God, stop being so dramatic! I *did* make sure she was okay until she woke up, but I thought she had sensed me, so I spoke before she saw me, and the claws are a natural response of her wolf. I hardly think you can blame me for those.” Her statement mixed with a huff, and she crossed her arms defiantly.

“You made her bleed. So yeah, I can blame you all right. I can blame you all night. In fact, I can blame you until the sun comes back up and goes down again if I fucking feel like it.”

“Ugh. Shut up, D. I’m the only one here who...”

Their banter muddled in my ears as I watched them wide-eyed. Besides the fact that a Vampire hottie was, for some reason, protecting me from another Vampire who was somehow shockingly friendly, and his younger sister, their interaction was both concerning and fascinating.

*Wait? Did I just call him a hottie?*

My wolf contentedly stretched inside me, wholeheartedly agreeing.

The memory of our kiss, and the way he’d made every inch of me feel alive returned, warmth spread through my entire body, craving more.

My attention focused on the way the muscles of his jaw contracted and released as he quarreled with his sister over me. The way the blue flecks in his crystalline hazel eyes caught the light of the waning sun, sparkling within his gaze like tiny river crystals. Or the way his muscles shifted with his movements under the cream-colored sweater he wore, the material clinging to his broad shoulders, chest, and waist to show the toned body that hid underneath it.

It reminded me of the full arm tattoo that I’d partially seen before, and since he seemed to have healed from what the Hunters had done to him, I wondered if it was fully decipherable now.

My hands itched to pull up his sleeve and take a tiny peek.

“Hey, are you okay?” D’s deep voice filtered into my unsettling thoughts, and I blinked to find him standing right in front of me. Not getting a response, he took another step closer, bringing with him the overwhelming intensity that seemed to surround him.

His cologne of pine, wild orchids, and smoked vetiver spontaneously filtered into my nostrils with his nearness, and before I could stop it, I inhaled deeply—unconsciously enjoying the way his intoxicating smell traveled through me, engulfing my being. My heightened sense of smell was my weakness here.

*Stupid need from my wolf to scent everything.*

His eyebrow lifted, and a grin slowly pulled at the corner of his full lips with my response to him, making his chin dimple return. It seemed so naughty that I was instantly captured by the gesture. I had never seen a man smile quite that way before, like there were a thousand delicious secrets he wanted to share with me and *only* me.

*Vampire. Don't forget he's a Vampire!*

Swallowing dry to regain my composure, I watched him briefly glance over his shoulder, making sure we had privacy. "You smell delicious too, Natasha. But right now, I just need to know that you are okay... You are still bleeding."

Heat rushed to my cheeks, not only because he knew I had scented him, but because only then did I feel him gently caressing my fingers as he held my hands in his.

What the hell was wrong with me today?

Slowly, I pulled my hands from his, taking a couple of steps back until my clarity returned. "I can't heal like a normal Wolf Shifter. I'm *different*. I need... help."

*Now why in the Moon Goddess' name did I tell him that? He's the enemy!*

"I know..." His words were kind yet filled with concern, and he reached for my cheek, a thumb gently stroking my skin and sending tingles down my body before his touch disappeared. "Vane, please get the healing potion kept in Natasha's nightstand."

"Here you go," his sister offered not a second later, moving so fast that the curtains billowed through the balcony doors.

A gasp escaped me with the start, and I took another step back, bumping into the brick wall.

"Vanessa!" D growled, and she cringed.

"Sorry, I thought you knew we were fast," she confessed, biting her lower lip before glancing at me. "I'm going to sit

over there,” she mumbled, deflated, shuffling back to her armchair.

Sighing, D offered me the potion, and I frowned at the brown bottle—it was one I’d seen many times.

Shadows suddenly swirled all around us, pulling from the corners of the balcony and from what seemed like thin air, even though night hadn’t yet fallen.

“Now, why would she need the potion, when the real thing is right here?” The voice echoed within the darkness, as though it were alive.

“What is-what?” I sputtered, watching the smokey bands gather next to D and effortlessly form a full man of flesh and bone.

When they dissolved, bottomless, forest-green eyes bored into mine as Dante straightened, the night he somehow harbored within returning to his core. An unmistakable air of danger exuded from his every pore, intensifying his intimidating presence, and although my wolf immediately recognized its power, I wasn’t afraid... I was mesmerized.

He had called himself the *Lord of Twilight* when I last saw him, and now I understood why. Somehow, he’d manipulated the darkness that existed in everything around us, and grew from it... or maybe he was *made* from them?

Arching a brow, Dante pushed D out of the way, until only he stood before me. D snorted behind him but didn’t attempt to rejoin us. Remaining silent, the mysterious stranger extended both palms toward me, expecting me to place mine on them.

“*Cuore mio...*” he spoke in a seductive tone, almost singing with the peculiar language. No question or statement accompanied the words, just his silent request for my touch.

“What kind of creature are you?” I murmured, too astounded by what I’d seen him do.

His lips twitched with amusement. “I’ve been called many things in my lifetime, but *a creature* has never been one of

them.” He waved his fingers at me, reminding me he was still waiting for my hands to reach him.

“Not to *your* face,” D added behind him, enjoying my question a bit too much, and making Dante narrow his eyes even though he didn’t turn to look at the Vampire.

Amusement also stirred within Dante’s gaze, telling me their interaction was nothing but friendly.

“I can wait all night,” Dante called to me, bringing my attention back to his outstretched hands. “There is no need to worry... I’m not the one who bites.”

“Yeah, that would be, Hannes—the Wolf Shifter,” D declared, and even Vanessa chuckled.

“You are a Vampire,” I reminded D, glancing at him over Dante’s shoulder.

D’s crooked grin returned, eyebrow lifting suggestively as his chin dimple flared to life. “Yeah, but my specialty is sucking.”

My eyes widened with the naughty meaning behind his words, cheeks instantly burning from embarrassment. I was shook.

“Ew!” Vanessa cringed. “So not needed.”

Dante and D’s laughter mixed in the air once more.

“Ignore him, *Cuore mio*. D is just being...”

“An ass?” I asked, unable to help myself from joining the playful banter, even though I should be hating these people right now. Clearly, there was something wrong with me because I was messing that up too.

“He’s just being *him*,” Dante offered with a chuckle. Bringing his hands even closer. “May I heal you now?”

My gaze briefly searched for Vanessa, finding unquestionable trust in her eyes.

When my attention returned to Dante, bands of shadow slowly left him in a seductive dance that enthralled me, stirring something in my core, calling to me, and for some reason that

I couldn't explain, I gave in. The instant my blood-stained palms slid onto his, long fingers wrapped around them. A familiar current of energy burst into my body.

No. Not energy. Magic.

His magic rushed through my fingertips, reaching not only my hands but all hidden corners of my being and restoring every inch of me. My gaze snapped from our joined hands to his eyes after my ripped skin easily mended, and I tried desperately to understand why Dante's magic was so familiar to me... I had never met him.

It felt a thousand times stronger than it ever had, but I was as certain that I had felt him before, as I was that my heart was pounding within my chest.

"How?" I asked, holding back the conflicting emotions the realization caused. I'd not only felt this before, I'd felt it every time I was forced to shift and was left tattered by the experience.

"I'm a once-in-a-lifetime type of Witch. I wield ancient magic, to be exact," he calmly explained, not truly understanding my question. "I'm the *Lord of Twilight*. Chosen by Hecate, Goddess of Magic and Witchcraft, the Night, and the Moon. She bestowed these gifts upon me when I was a baby, and—"

"No!" I protested, pulling my hands from his while my gaze swiftly searched for the potion Vanessa had brought in from the room.

The connection to his magic abruptly ended, leaving a bittersweet emptiness inside me that I couldn't understand, but I pushed through it, finding the brown bottle on the table next to where Vanessa sat. Everyone's attention followed me as I picked it up, my finger tracing the artfully etched symbol on the glass—an elegant golden torch I had admired so many times in the past.

"It is Hecate's symbol of light and guidance," Dante offered, his voice now burdened by the truth.



“This is the potion that has saved me time and time again,” I croaked, my throat constricting from both anger and betrayal as I spun to face him. “You made this, didn’t you? You made every single drop I ever drank. How did this ever get to Isis? How did it get to me?”

The heaviness and guilt of truths withheld spread over Dante’s, D’s, and even Vanessa’s expressions. They exchanged a look that said I wasn’t supposed to figure this out, at least not so soon.

“Do you know who Isis is?” I added. “Was she in on this all along?”

Silence met my questions, and I whirled around, marching into the room.

“Natasha, wait!” Vanessa called after me and the three of them rushed after me.

“How do you know my name?” I demanded, stopping in the middle of the library space, feeling like real fire burned through me. “I have *never* told any of you my name.”

Exchanging another burdened glance with Vanessa and Dante, D stepped forward. “We know who Isis is. We know she was assigned to protect you, and she—”

“Is this my room?” I interrupted because I couldn’t hear another word from him. I couldn’t accept anything that even insinuated that Isis had lied to me my entire life. She would never mix with Vampires who took advantage of humans. She was the only mother I knew; she would *never* lie to me or betray me this way.

“What?”

“You asked Vanessa to find the potion placed on *my* nightstand earlier,” I snapped at D, my eyes boring into his fiercely. “Does that mean this is my room while I’m held here against my will?”

A troubled breath left him. “Natasha, we are not holding you against—”

“Is this my space?” I demanded, noticing Vanessa and Dante lower their heads at my words.

“Yes,” D replied, his voice heavy as the muscles of his jaw jerked.

“Then get out!” All the hurt, confusion, desolation, and anger churning through me reverberated with the demand.

Without a single word, they all crossed the room toward the white double doors, leaving me as alone as I felt.

Shaken, I walked back out to the balcony, desperately needing fresh air. I let myself fall onto one of the armchairs and closed my eyes, blocking any thought that suggested Isis was not who I thought she was, and inhaling deeply over and over again to calm the emotions trying to overwhelm me.

I just sat there, glancing at the contained forest beyond the steel rail. My entire life I’d wanted to be in the city, among humans, but now I wasn’t sure if this was a dream come true or just the beginning of my nightmare.

One by one, all the moments I’d shared with Isis began to swirl in my mind. The once-happy memories were now filled with doubt, and it was just one more thing for me to hate.

Why did Isis have Dante’s potions? Had he tricked her into thinking he was just a regular Witch trying to help, or did she know about him all along? Was she somehow involved with these people? With the Vampires? Had she lied to me all my life about who she was?

Why weren’t D and Vanessa deformed, cursed creatures deprived of thought, logic, or feeling like I was led to believe by the Hunters? Like my entire pack was told by their Alpha for years?

Truth was, there wasn’t an ounce of Vanessa that wasn’t filled with some type of emotion. Although it was troubling to admit, she was sweet and kind of funny. Something inside me did agree with her, under different circumstances, we could have been best friends. I’d even admit I wished there had been someone like her in the pack to be close with aside from Isis.

Something else troubled me. The way D reacted to his sister accidentally making my claws come out, was as though he already knew me, already cared for me. He'd entrusted his sister to watch over me while I was unconscious and seeing me bleed seemed to cause him physical distress—the way I might feel for the hurt of someone I loved.

*“I can smell her blood,”* he'd seethed to Vanessa in reprimand, like spilling my blood was a crime, something that should *never* happen.

I almost snorted at that; bleeding was a regular occurrence for me. The only constant in my life had been the dreaded monthly attempt to shift into my wolf, only to fail miserably, leaving my body in shambles.

Yet, his reaction to me being hurt had been possessive, like I was *his* to protect.

It was alarming to me, but if I was honest with myself, something deep inside me liked it. The same *something* that enjoyed the way his thumb stroked my cheek so lovingly... my wolf. His gesture took me back to the mountain after I thought I'd saved him, only for him to end up saving my life instead.

*“How could I possibly fear you when you are the woman who brought me back to life...”*

Those were the words D shared right before he kissed me. At the time, I assumed he meant rescuing him from the Hunters, but now I wasn't so sure.

As the sky darkened before my eyes, the city became alive with twinkly lights, music, and the lively spirit of the humans. All the while conflicting thoughts, doubts, memories, and unanswered questions I wasn't certain I wanted the answers to, tortured my mind.

My arms tightened around myself as the temperature dropped, but I wasn't cold. I welcomed the chilled breeze sweeping my hair back, because it was the only comforting thing here, the only recognizable element I could hold on to.

Standing, I walked closer to the railing, seeing the park alive with visitors, and even a colorful machine I could see peeking through the trees. Once more, I inspected the building where I was currently held. We were on the highest floor, nothing above it but the roof of the building, while *New York City* stretched below us in every direction.

Unfortunately for me, my knowledge of the human world extended only to the stories and bits Isis had shared with me about it, and to the makeup I'd learn to use and love. I didn't know how humans called the homes in constructions this tall, especially the ones on the last floor, but glancing down at the levels created by the balconies along each floor, I was confident I could climb down to the street without anyone noticing in time to stop me.

My body flinched as the bouts of pain I had begun to feel in the past few hours returned, twisting my stomach. Hunger. The kind of debilitating hunger I hadn't experienced since Isis began taking care of me as a child. Before that, it wasn't uncommon to go a day or two, sometimes three without nourishment. My uncle never remembered to feed me, and I was too small to find the communal dining room on my own. Not to mention, that no one in the pack dared to go against his orders of not coming near me, even if it was just to help me eat.

Taking a slow, calming breath, I caressed my stomach, trying to figure out why I was so famished. I had eaten last night before bed, after the attack on the village. It had maybe been half a day, why was I starving?

Soothing shadows suddenly shifted behind me, but I'd felt the swaying dance of energy before I saw or heard the Dark Witch. Thank the Goddess my senses were back in control. Oddly enough, I was grateful for his arrival; glad I was no longer alone with my troubling thoughts.

“You could escape, but I wonder, what comes after?”

His question wasn't mocking, or pitiful, only bringing attention to my reality.

No answer reached him because I didn't know what came next. What would I do after I escaped their hold? Though I'd heard of *New York* before, I didn't know the city or how far away it was from my home mountain. I had no idea where to go, or how to try to search for Isis.

*Do I even still have a home?* I didn't have an answer for that either. Probably not.

"Didn't I throw you out?" I asked instead, glancing back at Dante over my shoulder, eyes narrowed just like he'd done when D messed with him.

A sarcastic smirk teased his lips but didn't take hold. "I thought about that but hear me out." He raised a finger as though to emphasize his point. "Technically, you threw me out of the room, and we are on the balcony, so..."

"You are still out," I finished, seeing Dante's lips stretch into a perfect smirk, not caring to hold back.

"Exactly." He winked. "Like my logic?"

"It's surprisingly sound," I replied, unable to hold the chuckle that escaped me.

"See? I knew you'd get me." His arms crossed over his chest, and he rested a shoulder on the brick wall behind him, crossing his ankles in a relaxed stance. He just looked at me, seeming pleased with himself that he'd made me smile.

Driven by curiosity, I fully faced the Dark Witch, adopting a similar stance as I leaned against the balcony railing. The thick, black turtleneck and elegant pants he wore, mixed with the shadow bands still swaying around him, as though they were part of him. His lightly tanned skin was the only interruption between his obsidian hair, outfit, and power.

It should have hidden him from view, like a cloak I suspected he enjoyed wearing, but I soon realized there was something about Dante in the midst of night.

It was as though he became alive in it.

Our Moon Goddess's light seemed to dance within his bottomless eyes, illuminating him from the inside out until his

very skin appeared to faintly glow. The more I observed him in the silent embrace of nightfall, the more his presence became all-consuming, mysterious, imposing...

Pushing against the wall, he strutted toward me without uttering a single word, extending his hands to me just like he'd done this afternoon. Notes of bright citrus, rosemary, and persimmon filtered into my nose, and just like it happened with D, I was hopeless but to scent him, breathing him deeply.

The effect was just as overpowering, rushing through my being and bringing parts of me to the surface that seemed dormant until now. Even my wolf curled with need inside me, fully enjoying him.

What was it about these men that caused such weird reactions in us? Didn't my wolf understand I couldn't trust any of them?

Bringing his imposing darkness over me, the Dark Witch stopped barely a couple of feet away, his captivatingly sparkling gaze falling to his hands, expecting my touch as though it belonged to him. My skin tingled with the sudden need to feel him, and before I realized why I was doing this, I slid my hands into his.

"Perfect fit," Dante whispered, leaning into me. His warm breath fanned my lips as his head slowly tilted.

The breath caught in my throat.

# 9

To my unexpected disappointment, Dante bypassed my mouth, pressing his against my neck and leaving a soft, possessive kiss there instead. The gesture was too intimate, sending a delicious shudder down my spine, yet he'd done it so naturally, so comfortably, as though it was the one place his lips belonged. Like it was his birthright to kiss me, and he planned on claiming it at every turn.

As though I'd always been his.

I wasn't exactly sure if it was his kiss that left me breathless, the rush of his esoteric magic flowing into me like it belonged with me, or the combination of both, but I welcomed it. Leaning away only enough to look at me, Dante's eyes bored into mine, and he smirked once more, seeming pleased to indulge in my touch.

"It wasn't supposed to be like this, Natasha..." he whispered, his voice tainted by sadness. "We never wanted to seem like your... *enemy*."

Blinking away the delightful haze the Dark Witch had created, I slowly pulled my hands from his, effectively cutting off his soothing flow of magic. "I'm not sure *you* are..." I confessed. "But I don't know what to think about the Vampires."

"That's fair..."

"You have always healed me," I added, knowing it was his potions that erased my uncle's torture all these years. "And though it pains me to accept it, taking me from the mountain

truly saved my life... I wouldn't have survived against the Hunters," I admitted, hurt slashing my being with each truth. "I wouldn't have survived Ryker."

"Please don't think about that anymore. You are safe here, with us." Dante's voice was calm, but his words failed to mask the ire coursing through his body and making every inch of him tense at the reminder of Ryker's attack.

"Why?" I asked, unable to let it go. "Why would you help me over and over again, when I didn't even know you existed?" Pausing, I placed a hand on his chest, hoping to help his concern for me ease, and his muscles relax before looking back up at him. "Why would you risk your life, going against an entire pack of Vampire Hunters to save me?"

Dante's eyes briefly closed with my touch, and he captured my hand, lifting it off his chest. His soft lips pressed over my knuckles, in an almost reverent way. "Do you believe in fate, *Cuore mio*?"

"No," I instantly answered, only to see that brilliant smirk of his return, making the moon itself shine through his bottomless green eyes.

"That's a shame, Natasha. Because fate believes in you."

Pressing my lips together, I tried to contain the pain twisting my stomach, but he immediately noticed.

"What is it? Are you unwell?" Before I could answer, his shadows rose from the floor to churn around me, and he cursed under his breath in the strange language he spoke. "You are starving."

The Dark Witch's words were accompanied by a sudden warmth that caused my aching to recede, but he still wrapped an arm around my waist, swiftly guiding me into the room.

"I'm fine. I ate last night and only missed breakfast—"

Dante stopped in his tracks, facing me as his hands settled on my shoulders. "You've been asleep for a day and a half, Natasha."



Shock slammed into my being while I glanced up at him, concern dulling the moonlight within his gaze.

“What?” I rasped. Had it been almost two days since the attack?

“It was the magic. D’s and mine,” he explained, knowingly. “Bjørn has been *nourishing* you while you slept, but he’s out today, and you need actual food.” He glanced toward the door. “Vanessa, we need you.”

Confusion briefly gripped me, he seemed to be calling for her, but he hadn’t even raised his voice.

The door opened sluggishly, and the Vampire girl peeked her head inside so impossibly slow that it was comical. “Yes?”

“Must you do that?” he sighed impatiently. “It’s like you are stuck in slow motion.”

“I don’t want to scare her again. D’s going to strangle me if her wolf gets startled because of me and hurts her. And although I wouldn’t exactly die, I like my neck just the way it is, thank you very much.”

The Dark Witch and I exchanged a glance, his lips twitching, but I actually felt bad for her. It wasn’t her fault I couldn’t shift or heal like a normal shifter, and she’d been sweet to me.

“I promise to remember how fast you are. Just don’t go extra crazy around me, you are still a Vampire, and I don’t know you.” It was true that I had no freaking clue what was happening here, but a wolf’s instincts never failed, and my wolf didn’t sense any danger from them. She seemed at ease in their presence... but even if I didn’t understand why, I couldn’t forget their true nature.

A small smile curved Vanessa’s lips, and she nodded. “I understand...” Pausing, her gaze went to Dante before returning to me. “It takes time to accept *this*.”

Once again, her words were much deeper than they appeared, and I wondered what exactly she meant by that.

“*Mia Bella*, please help Natasha get familiar with the room, and show her where everything is. She needs to get ready so she can have dinner with us.”

“My pleasure,” the Vampire girl answered, smiling at me.

Placing a kiss on my cheek and giving me one last whiff of his inciting scent, Dante walked out of the room, closing the door behind him.

“This way...” She gestured to the door on the right side of the bed, her other hand instinctively reaching for my arm.

“Don’t touch me,” I reminded, and she paused, looking at me like she was trying to decipher something.

“Right. Sorry.” Turning, she walked straight to the door, opened it, and disappeared on the other side.

“What is this?” I asked, slowly pulling the door after her.

“The bathroom, silly,” she answered as I stepped into it. “I thought you may want to refresh, maybe take a quick shower before dinner.”

“This room has a bathroom inside?” My eyes instantly grew wide.

The bathroom was nothing like the one we had in the village.

A polished white stone vanity extended the length of the wall on the left side and held two sinks that seemed carved into said stone. The finish was so shiny it might as well be a mirror. To the right was a shower that looked nothing like the ones I’d ever used. It was probably the size of four of the stalls of our communal bathroom combined, but instead of a wooden casing, and slab floors, pretty tile squares in a curious pattern adorned the walls and floor, looking as smooth and glossy as the vanity did. A door made of pure glass enclosed the space, while every fixture in sight appeared to be made of gold.

“This is the toilet closet,” the Vampire girl continued, pointing to a door next to the shower, then moving toward the one in the corner. “And this is the walk-in closet. You’ll find

fresh clothes, underwear, and anything else you might need in there.”

“Does everyone use this bathroom? Are they coming in after I’m done?” I asked, wondering if D and Dante would be showering here too. Or her.

“Heavens, no!” She snorted. “We would kill each other if we all had to share it. Everyone has one; this one is just for you.”

“For me?” It was hard to mask the shock on my face, and her lips twitched.

“Don’t worry. All the rooms in Dante’s penthouse are masters, so we all have our own baths and walk-ins. He’s fancy...” She wiggled her brows, walking into the closet.

I wanted to follow but I took a moment to glance around me again, my gaze spilling out of the bathroom and into the lavish room. This was Dante’s home?

“What’s a penthouse?” I asked seeing Vanessa peek her head out of the closet.

“Um, well. Most buildings have like three to four apartments per floor, but a penthouse is a home on the highest level, that usually occupies the entire floor of the building. So, the entire floor is ours.”

“And you all live here?”

Warmth trickled into her expression at that moment. “Yeah. We are family... Are you coming?”

With a nod, and more confused than ever, I entered the closet after her, trying not to bump into her... or so I thought. A gasp escaped me the instant I realized the closet was the size of our cabin back in the village. Rows and rows of clothes in every color and style hung from the cabinets, organized like a rainbow. There were dresses, coats, handbags, and even shoes in what seemed like glass displays. To say that I was overwhelmed by it all, was an understatement.

“Everything should fit you here, but if you need anything at all, just call me. No need to shout, simply say my name and

I will hear you.”

Before I could ask what I was supposed to wear, Vanessa turned around and walked out of the space—the clicking of the bathroom door announcing I was alone.

For several moments I just stood there, looking at the never-ending clothes that surrounded me. I’d never had to pick clothes in my life. The only thing different from the white pants and shirt the shifters wore were the clothes Isis got for me, and the outfits were already put together by her. When my gaze fell on an armchair nearby, and I suddenly realized there was an outfit left there for me.

*Thank the Goddess.*

Reaching for it, I took the pair of leggings, underwear, and the soft sweater that reminded me of the pretty clothes in Isis’ suitcase, then returned to the bathroom. The towels, I discovered, were in the cabinet next to the vanity, so I took one of those too. Dropping the fuzzy shorts and top on the floor, I opened the shower door and turned on the water.

“Eeee!” I screeched a second later as scolding hot water poured onto my body from several places on the wall, jumping out of the way.

“Are you okay?” Vanessa immediately asked, worry dripping from her voice.

“The water,” I panted. “It’s so hot.”

I might as well have said the water spoke to me given the perplexed look on her face.

“Yeah... it’s a shower,” she replied as the bathroom filled with swirling steam. Her look suddenly turned to concern. “You didn’t have hot water in the village?”

“No! Why would I—?” I was about to ask why I would have heated water if it was just there to wash our bodies, but her expression stopped me.

Understanding filtered into the Vampire girl’s eyes, and she offered me another small smile. “No worries. I’ll show you how it works.”

Awkwardly avoiding looking at my bare body, she came to my side, her behavior filling me with confusion. It was normal for everyone to see each other naked in the shifter village, wasn't it the same way in the human world?

Remaining silent, I watched her turn the lever from the end of the red side, taking it much closer to the blue side.

“There, it should be nice and hot but without peeling your skin off. Trust me, you want the hot water, it melts all your troubles away.”

Sighing as though she could feel it working its supposed magic on her, she grinned and pointed to some contraption on the wall with two fancy bottles on it.

“This one is the shampoo, and this one is the conditioner... to wash your hair,” she clarified, noticing the confusion on my face. “The shampoo goes first. You rub it on your scalp until it makes bubbles and after you rinse it out, you add the conditioner to your hair, leaving it on for a bit to soften it.”

Although I had no idea what Vanessa was talking about, I nodded.

“And this is the soap for your—”

“I know what to do with soap,” I confirmed.

“Of course.” She nodded, stepping out once more. “I'll be out here if you need me.”

I tentatively stepped back into the shower. The warm water poured over my body instantly, and the most amazing sensation I had ever experienced spread along my skin, melting my entire being.

How had I ever lived without hot water?!

After several moments of basking in the indescribable feeling, I reached for the soap, ready to lather my hair and body with it as I'd done my whole life. My gaze lingered on the fancy bottles Vanessa showed me, but I figured if the hot water had been exactly what she'd promised, then I might as well give shampoo and conditioner a chance.

The moment I stepped out, I found the Vampire girl standing in the corner of the room, next to a desk I hadn't yet noticed. She had a brush and something else in her hand that I couldn't quite recognize.

"Oh, you look so cute. Purple it's totally your color. It suits you," she offered, referring to the sweater she'd chosen for me from the closet.

"Thanks..."

"I can help you blow dry your hair if you want. It's getting colder in the city now and though we are warm and toasty in here, it's better if you don't leave it wet. I know you are more vulnerable without shifting, and I wouldn't like you to get sick or anything."

My attention went to the tool in her hand, trying to figure out what the hell it was. I didn't answer, not fully knowing what to say. Silence extended between us while my mind and my instincts fought each other. Something inside wanted me to accept the seemingly sincere friendship Vanessa was offering, but my mind and everything I thought to know about her kind wouldn't let me.

*Vampire...*

"I can brush my hair. It will be fine wet."

The hope that somewhat glimmered in her expression faded, but then her now recognizable smile returned, and she placed the items back on the desk slowly. "Of course. I'll be out in the hall when you are ready to head to the kitchen."

My wolf stirred inside me as I watched her walk away, remorse and sadness inundating my chest.

Vanessa stopped before reaching the door and hesitantly turned to look at me. "I know you grew up in a different world, and you were told so many things about us that you might not know what to believe. But I promise that if you give us a chance, Natasha, you'll soon realize we are nothing like you were made to believe."

*D didn't exactly melt in the sun so... my mind suddenly reminded, contradicting its own mistrust. Wth?*

The ache pouring from her words made its way up to me, and as I watched her grab the doorknob, my wolf urged me to stop her.

“Maybe you can help me dry my hair after all... please,” I mumbled, frowning.

Vanessa’s grey eyes almost beamed with joy when she faced me, contrasting beautifully with her tanned skin and soft features. Her curly brown strands bounced with each step she took. “Sit here.”

I did as she asked, realizing the desk was not a desk but a beauty station filled with a million trinkets I hadn’t seen before. The moment my eyes settled on the illuminated mirror dread slammed into my being, and my hand flew to my face, covering the mark over my eye. With everything that had happened, I’d completely forgotten about it, and now everyone had seen it... including D, and Dante.

Unfortunately for me, my reaction wasn’t at all subtle, and the Vampire girl’s eyes filled with concern.

“I don’t need your pity,” I clarified, hating that I didn’t have my makeup to cover it up.

“It’s not pity, sweetie,” she assured, reaching for the bottom of her sweatshirt. “It’s recognition.” When she pulled the fabric up, a jagged scar on her stomach was revealed.

Stunned, I let go of my eye, focusing on her skin. “I thought Vampires self-healed, like shifters did,” I whispered.

“Yes, and no.” She shrugged, letting go of her sweatshirt. “This happened when I was a child. I was stubborn, you see, and decided I could totally ride a bike even though I’d never even owned one. So, I got on my friend’s bicycle, and down the street I went. A steep street, may I add. Lo and behold, I crashed into a few crates outside the bodega, and the spiked pedal of the bike sliced my stomach open. It took one hundred stitches and it hurt like a mother trucker.”

Taking the hairbrush and the strange tool, she turned it on, the thing emitting a buzzing sound as hot air blew from it.

Blinking, while she began to spray something on my hair, I processed her story. “Was that when you died?”

A chuckle escaped Vanessa. “Well, my mom kind of wanted to kill me, but no. I didn’t die. Why would you ask that?”

“So how did you become a Vampire if you didn’t die, and you weren’t cursed?”

My question must have been loaded because she frowned, staying silent for a few minutes, all the while brushing my all-white hair with her hot air-blowing machine.

“Sorry, there is just a lot to unpack there,” she admitted. “I’ve never died. I haven’t been cursed either.”

“So, you were born a Vampire?” I asked, shocked.

“No.” She laughed. “No one is born this way. I mean, the first Vampiress was born of a mother and a father, but that’s a whole other story. Our race was created by her though, by the Countess of the Dracul Dynasty. I was just human one day, and then I made a choice to become... *different*, but still, me... I know that doesn’t make sense, but it’s how it felt.”

My teeth nibbled on the inside of my cheek while tried to understand. “So, you chose to become a Vampire?”

“You could say that...” Vanessa nodded, her expression sobering with the memory. “It was the hardest thing I’ve ever been through, but I would do it all over again in a heartbeat.”

“Is that why you said earlier that some things are difficult to accept?”

Sighing, she nodded once more, finishing up the other side of my hair. My strands were straight and limp, it didn’t take much to dry them.

“Then why would you choose a life where you go after innocent humans and enslave them to drink their blood? Why would choose to be a monster?”

Both disbelief and hurt flashed over her face with my words, and she physically took a step back, as though I’d slapped her.



I instantly regretted the words, but it was too late, they'd already sliced through her. Unfortunately, everything I'd been told about them was ingrained in me, and I wasn't sure what was real anymore.

"It's done," she replied instead, a hard, cold mask falling over her soft features. Dropping the brush and hot air-blowing machine on the desk, she marched toward the door without another word.

Except, she abruptly spun to face me.

"I know you have been brainwashed by those fucking assholes your entire life. That you've been kept from the real world so there's a lot you don't know, but that doesn't give you an excuse to be a bitch, Natasha. I know all of this is a lot for you, so I want to be patient and understanding. But frankly, the fact that you don't want the 'dangerous Vampires' to touch you when you are arguably the most powerful being among all of us, is laughable."

Flabbergasted, I stared at her. "I can't even shift into my wolf without hurting myself, Vanessa."

"That's a moot point!" she exclaimed, throwing her arms in the air. "What you are able or unable to achieve right now, doesn't stop what you are destined to become." Both awe and anger mixed within her voice and she humorlessly chuckled, shaking her head while her gaze searched for something far away. "You know, I shouldn't even answer your stupid question, but the truth is, the choice wasn't between remaining human or becoming whatever 'monster' you think I am. Yet, between who I was and being part of a destiny bigger than me. So yes, I would choose it again... and that's all I'm going to say about it."

Whirling around, she walked out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

Barely a second passed before the door swung open again, and she pointed a single finger at me.

"And I'll tell you something else! My brother risked his life to get to you. D endured vicious magic meant to kill him

and let the Hunters catch him so he could distract that asshole from forcing you to mate. Everything they did to him was real. His gushing blood was real. The slashes they enjoyed leaving along his body and ripping his skin open were real. The profound weakness he fought to still fly you out of danger was very much real, and although he needed blood, he didn't drain any humans to survive it. Even when his decision messed everything the hell up, he saved your life, Natasha. And I'm certain that if he had to choose between his safety and you, he would risk his life for you again without a second thought. But you don't really care about that, right? Because D is just a monster to you."

The door slammed against the frame with her retreat for the second time, but swung open from the force, splitting in the middle.

"Impressive," Dante sarcastically offered, appearing in the hallway. "It takes a lot to piss off Vanessa. And I mean, A LOT. Of all of us, she's the patient one."

My eyes stung even as I looked at him, because all I could see were the images of the "human", struggling to stay alive in that cage in the forest. Pain sliced through me again, but it wasn't because I was starving. It grew from the vivid memories of how the hunters had beaten D within an inch of his life... and he'd only done that to protect me from Ryker.

The scenes changed in my mind's eye to D holding me in his arms and jumping into the sky before Ryker's wolf could sink his claws into me and the Hunters ripped my flesh to pieces.

"Hey," Dante cooed, coming to my side, and cradling my cheek. "Whatever happened, it's okay... You've been through a lot—"

"It was you, wasn't it?" I asked, glancing up at him as my throat burned, the memories becoming clear for me.

Confusion clouded his eyes. "What was me?"

"You were the darkness cloaking the Vampire attack in the village, obscuring them from view."

A heavy sigh left Dante, expanding his chest slowly. “I had to. When Ryker grabbed you against your will, D quite literally snapped, the plan went to fucking hell, and we all had to jump into the fold to help him as best we could. Bjørn, Vane, and Hannes distracted the other hunters, and I cloaked everyone to protect them. It was my job to keep my family safe.”

“I understand,” I admitted.

His attention went to the hallway, concern growing over his features. “What did you say to her?”

Shame squeezed my heart at the hurt I’d seen in her eyes. “I called her a... monster,” I whispered so low, hoping he wouldn’t hear it. I couldn’t even look at him.

“*Cazzo!*” he cursed under his breath, and let go of me, rushing toward the door, but suddenly stopped. “Bjørn isn’t back yet so I ordered pizza. It’s on the kitchen counter. After the hall to the left.”

With that, he disappeared.

# 10

Shadows greeted me when I stepped into the hallway, but it wasn't Dante's welcoming darkness. The penthouse was silent, only a few spotlights on the ceiling illuminated my path, while I tried to make it to the kitchen.

I didn't know why I was going. I wasn't even hungry anymore.

When I turned the corner after the second hall, bright lights turned on of their own accord, as though sensing my presence, and a space larger than I expected extended before me. The kitchen was huge, filled with the same white, polished countertops, light greys, gold fixtures, and luxurious simplicity my room had. A huge refrigerator was in it, with two ovens on the wall, and a few machines I wouldn't even know how to use.

Five boxes were stacked on the large counter that resembled a table. It had several chairs but only on one side, and it divided the otherwise open space between the kitchen and what appeared to be a communal sitting area.

As the smell of delicious, strange spices reached my nose, my stomach spasmed, immediately reminding me I hadn't eaten.

"Pizza," the box read, yet I had no idea what pizza was.

Opening the box, I noticed a round, flat bread inside it—or at least it appeared to be toasted bread. What looked like tomato sauce, spices, and loads and loads of melted cheese

were piled on top, causing my stomach to howl. If it had cheese, it couldn't be bad.

Glancing around to make sure I was still alone, and no one heard that, I grabbed one of the fancy ceramic plates near it and placed one of the cut triangles on it. I'd never seen food shaped like this, so I turned it from side to side just to make sure it was ready to eat.

An explosion of flavors hit my tongue with the first bite, the bread surprisingly crispy at the bottom despite the hot, melted ingredients on top. Unfortunately, the heaviness in my soul tainted the delicious experience, and after the third bite, I pushed the plate aside, resting my forearms on the cold stone counter.

A million thoughts ran through my head, tormenting me. I'd grown up believing Vampires were the creatures of nightmares. All I'd ever wanted was to join the Hunters and take revenge on the monsters that took my parents from me... but now that I was here and saw Vampires with my own eyes—the ones who saved my life for reasons I still couldn't fathom—I wasn't exactly sure *they* were the monsters.

After witnessing the hurt my words inflicted on Vanessa, I suspected my entire life may have been a lie.

“You should eat more, you need the strength,” D's voice cut through my thoughts, and I glanced up to find him across from me.

Under the bright lights, I could see him as clear as day. He stood by the sofa, still wearing the cream-colored sweater from earlier, which greatly flattered his caramel-tanned skin and his hazel eyes. Both hands were plunged into the front pockets of his dark jeans, unlaced boots on his feet while he observed me like he was trying to decipher the mystery of me.

My gaze swept his body briefly, paying attention to his wellbeing for the first time, after truly acknowledging what he'd done for me. No more claw marks sliced his skin, not on his jaw, neck, or even on the visible area of his forearms.

The sleeves he'd pushed up to his elbows showed the tattoos that he chose for life, but they were no longer cut up, his body had fully mended from the attack. Unexpected relief coursed through me, followed by intrigue. Sadly, I still couldn't make out the figures that extended over his arm.

"You look well," I offered in a low, contrite voice. "I'm glad you recovered from the attack."

His guarded demeanor changed with my words, though confusion lingered in his expression. "I did... Thanks to my sister."

My gut squeezed with the hurt in his voice as he mentioned Vanessa. "D, I—"

"Listen, I understand this is difficult for you," he interrupted. "I can't even imagine the trauma you are going through after what happened with your pack... with your uncle. I know it's not easy to be pulled from the only place you've ever called home, by people you don't even know, and the worst part is that I can't even offer you an explanation, not yet. All I can say, is that I *had* to do what I did, Natasha. I had to save your life."

I nodded, the agony of my uncle's death sentence constricting my throat and stopping the words that should have spilled freely. *Thank you for saving my life...*

Sensing my distress, D walked toward me, and my pulse suddenly began to race, remembering the way it felt when he was near. His fingers gently brushed my cheek as he cradled it in his hand, and I fully stopped breathing when he gently curled a finger under my chin to lift it so I would look at him.

His hypnotizing presence and the unexpected warmth from his touch instantly captured me, and though my logical mind ordered me to pull away from the enticingly dangerous Vampire, my wolf only wished we were closer.

*Had she lost her furry mind? He was a Vampire!*

The second his scent reached my nose, I lost what little reason I had left, and my lips slightly parted, tingling with the need to feel his again.

D's gaze darkened as it fell to my lips, and his jaw tensed, as though he was painfully aware of my response to him and was fighting himself not to claim everything he craved from me.

Somehow, I found the strength to lean back, his hand falling from my cheek and breaking the effortless influence he had on me.

“*Caralho.*” The curse swirled under his breath before he stepped back, making it seem like maybe, I had the same effect over him. Rubbing both hands over his face, D sighed. “Here is the thing... I’m not the only one who put it all on the line to get you out of there. So, no matter what you’ve been told, you can *never* call my sister that again. Do you understand?”

The underlined anger and protectiveness churning inside him engulfed his words, but I didn’t need him to explain.

“I won’t,” I answered, lowering my gaze to my hands.

His heated gaze hovered over my body for a few more seconds, and I could feel it as strongly as his touch. When I glanced up, he was walking out of the room and into the hallway, but before the shadows obscured him from me, D stopped.

“We don’t do that here, okay?” he called over his shoulder, not turning to look at me.

“What?” I asked, my breath raggedly resuming.

“Hurt each other...”

With that, D went into the darkness, walking away from me.

---

Lights sparkled all around me as I stood on the balcony, yet unlike in my mountain, they didn’t come from the stars. There were no stars here, only buildings so tall that they hid the sky.

It was well beyond midnight now, and although most humans were asleep, cars and people could still be heard

through the city. Tonight, I joined the nocturnal souls, unable to find rest... unable to find peace.

Another lightning bolt illuminated the ground, its following thunder making the buildings tremble as though they feared the Moon Goddess' wrath. Sure, there was no true goddess, but her tears still fell over the city, the droplets dampening my skin while my worry for Isis grew as strong as the storm.

I shouldn't be here. I should be out there, looking for her. Was she safe? Had she won the battle against Ryker? Had she killed him?

Had I lost her?

Anxiety clutching my being, I looked down, examining the distance between me and the street. I needed to leave this place. I needed to find Isis.

Gauging approximately fifteen floors underneath me, I swung my leg over the metal railing and flung myself onto the balcony right under me. My wolf's stealth helped my bare feet land silently onto the terrace, reaching for the next railing and dropping another floor. The first three levels were a breeze, but by the fourth, my palms struggled to hold on to the damp metal railing, and my grip began to weaken. I aimed for the next balcony, but my hands slipped before I could angle my body and jump onto the terrace, falling off the building instead.

The next railing crashed against my ribs, and I bounced outwards, plummeting toward the street.

"Aa—!" My scream cut mid-breath as strong arms suddenly caught me, flat-out stopping my fall. Gasping, I glanced up to find D holding me against his bare chest, dark, leathery wings flapping behind him while his irises turned red from the fury.

Our descent was slow from there, measured, but his every muscle jerked, the intensity of his stare saying he might just strangle me himself for pulling this little stunt and hurting myself.



His chest was warm against my hands, yet another contradiction from the frigid cold beings that Vampires were supposed to be. D helped me stand the instant his feet touched the ground, and my wolf stirred unhappily inside me from the loss of him. I truly needed her to get her shit together, because all she wanted was for me to caress and ogle the Vampire's chest.

I stumbled a step before I could get my bearings, a hand flying to my ribs just as D's wings folded into his back. Thankfully, only the rain accompanied us in the street right now, so there were no human witnesses.

"There's an elevator in the penthouse, you know?"

Well, the rain, *and* Dante.

His shadows swirled among the storm until he stood next to me, seeming a bit more amused at my attempt to escape than D was. "It's a private elevator too," he specified. "And wouldn't you know it? It only has two buttons. One to the top, one to the lobby. So easy."

Huffing, I pushed the soaked hair out of my face and glared at D, refusing to acknowledge the Dark Witch's sarcasm, *and* ignoring the ache radiating on my left side. "You didn't have to do that; I could have—"

"Sure, why on earth would I save your life, *again*?" D argued. "I mean, you can fly too."

"I don't need *you* to save me," I growled, biting down the pain.

"Of course not. I should have just let you splatter on the street."

"Not exactly my idea of painting the town red, but okay."

"Shut up, Dante!" both D and I snapped, but his lips twitched, saying he was enjoying this.

"You could have just asked for help," D continued.

"You can't keep me here against my will!"

“We are not keeping you against—” D pinched the bridge of his nose—probably asking the goddess for patience. “We are protecting you, Natasha. Isn’t that obvious? And what are you so desperate to achieve that you would literally jump off a building?”

“I have to go back to the mountain, okay!” I retorted, my hand gripping my side a bit harder to lessen the pain.

Dante’s gaze fell to my body, concern replacing his amusement—like he hadn’t yet realized that I seriously hurt myself. Bands of shadows rose around me instantly, numbing the pain as they swirled over my ribs.

“My family risked everything to get you out. I almost died getting you out of there. What the hell would you go back to the mountain for?” D demanded.

“I need to find Isis!” I yelled back at him, seeing the red ire immediately leave his gaze, guilt, and sadness engulfing his hazel eyes.

“Natasha, Isis—”

“No!” I cut off Dante. “I can’t just be here without knowing whether or not she’s alive. I need to know she didn’t lose her life because of me...” My words drowned in the sorrow and worry gripping my soul, but I forced them out anyway. Unfortunately, that wasn’t all I needed. The dark truth I struggled with, spilled from my lips before I could even stop it. “And... I need to know she didn’t kill Ryker.”

I expected the red ire to return to D’s irises, but they filled with an emotion I couldn’t understand. It was as though I had sliced his heart open instead.

“You are worried about Ryker?” he asked, stunned, and insulted.

“You don’t understand,” I whispered, ashamed. “The Ryker you saw that day, is not the Ryker I grew up with. Not the one I knew one day would be my mate. That Ryker would never—”

“But *that* Ryker did,” the Dark Witch interjected calmly, hurt and disbelief marring his sculpted features and mirroring

D's expression. "Perhaps he was just great at manipulating you. Showing you what you wanted to see, so you never saw the real him."

"I don't-I." I couldn't answer that. "Still, he doesn't deserve to die."

"Doesn't he?" Dante seethed, losing his cool, and something in his eyes said he would end Ryker the second he got the chance... without a single regret.

"How can you still defend him? He tried to kill you," D demanded, his statement thundering in unison with the storm.

My heart ripped a bit more with the reminder, and it took every ounce of strength I possessed not to fall apart from the pain. For so long, I'd thought Ryker loved me. Now, I realized that I had no idea what love was.

"It was not his fault. It was his Alpha's command," I excused weakly, desperate to believe it myself. "He was forced by my uncle's power; all the Hunters were. We are helpless against our Alpha. We can't fight it, he couldn't—"

A strangled gasp swallowed my words when D erased the space between us in the blink of an eye, pinning me against the wall of the building. Lightning cut across the sky in that moment, illuminating his sharp profile.

"There isn't a single power that exists—no sire bond, no Witch, no spell, or curse—that could *ever* make me hurt you," D vowed, his lips an inch away from mine as his fierce gaze held me captive. "I would burn down the world first, Natasha. I would burn the entire world for you."

He took a step back and his wings extended behind him, lifting him into the sky while powerful thunder marked his vow as true.

Trying to calm my ragged breaths, I looked up into the space where he disappeared.

"And on that note..."

The statement called my attention back to the Dark Witch as my being ached with D's declaration, and I found it difficult

to regain my breath.

“Granted,” Dante continued, “D has a flare for the dramatic, but I couldn’t agree more.” Extending both hands toward me confidently, he glanced into my eyes. “If you want to leave, no one will stand in your way...”

The action slightly contradicted his words, yet his gesture was becoming more inviting and reassuring each time he did it.

I glanced at the glimmering street behind me, wondering where the path would take me if I left. I wanted to find Isis more than anything, but something told me that if she were here, she would tell me to stay. Somehow, she knew these people, and she had trusted Dante with healing me throughout my life. The feelings inside of me were confusing AF—my wolf urged me to stay, regardless of how desperately the other part of me wanted to leave.

When my gaze returned to him, I found his hands still waiting for mine, his bottomless stare on me. My wolf’s emotions were clear though, she missed the warmth and relief she knew his touch would bring, and the truth was, I did too. Although it took a few moments, I could no longer make my feet move away from him... from *them*.

Glancing down at the Dark Witch’s offered hands, I placed mine in them.

A relieved smirk stretched Dante’s lips, as though a part of him feared I might not accept him. Pulling me in, he wrapped both arms around me, cradling me against his chest before his shadows took over, engulfing us.

“Isis is alive, by the way...” he whispered in my ear as the world blurred before my eyes, forcing me to shut them tightly.

When I opened them again, we were back in his home, but the dim atmosphere of greys, creams, and black hues was not the one I recognized as “my” room. It was his. Except, we weren’t exactly standing in it.

The firmness of his mattress spread under my body, mixed with the velvety softness of the thick blanket draped on it. He

smirked naughtily at me, still holding me in his arms as we fully “blended” into the space. I had no idea how he did it, but right now, I knew no other way to describe how he had transported us.

“Isis is alive?!” I screeched, heart pounding against my chest as I sat up, immediately regretting it. My hand flew to my rib.

“Careful, *Cuore mio*. Let me finish healing you first.”

I swatted his hand away, which brought a full smirk to his face. “Isis is alive,” I repeated, processing his words, but still not letting myself believe. “How do you know? How do I know you are telling me the truth?” Dear Goddess, she was still alive... “You could have told me!” I reproached.

“You could have asked...” he replied, earning a death stare from me.

“I swear to the Goddess, I have no idea how to kill a *Lord of Twilight*, but I will find out just for you.”

A sinful smile stretched his pouty lips corner to corner with my warning. “A death threat on our second date. Now, *that’s* my kind of woman.”

“Dante!”

Sighing heavily, the Dark Witch sat up too, pointedly watching me. “I could have told you. Of course, that would require you to trust that what I have to say is true. Can you do that, Natasha? Can you trust that I won’t lie to you?”

His question immediately crushed any protest I had, because that was the truth, wasn’t it? Could I let myself trust these strangers?

“Where is she? Please tell me...” I begged, needing nothing more than to see her.

Dante’s gaze softened, and he reached for me, cradling me against his chest once more. I let him, finding his touch strangely soothing like I had known him my entire life. He laid us back down on his lush bed, the magic beginning to flow from him and into me.

“Unfortunately, we don’t know where she is yet, but Bjørn is searching for her as we speak. The very reason he missed dinner. He knew in the mountain that she was alive, but her trace was too volatile to follow. He’s been searching for her since we brought you here.”

So many questions whirled in my mind, especially what powers Bjørn had that allowed him to look for her. Still, that was not the first thing to spill from my mouth. “He would do that for me?”

Resting me on my back, he leaned into me, and a warm smile that seemed out of place in Dante’s sarcastic demeanor pulled at his lips. “We would do anything for you, Natasha.”

As he came even closer, the breath caught in my throat. Was he going to kiss me? Wait, why the hell was I always expecting him to kiss me? My heartbeat immediately picked up a frantic speed. My wolf, however, was *very* comfortable under him.

That mischievous smirk of his returned, as though he could tell what I was thinking.

“Maybe you should return me to my room. This doesn’t seem like such a good idea...” I rasped, trying to think clearly.

Dante tilted his head in response, ignoring my mouth, and pressing his against my neck to leave another possessive kiss there. At the same time, shadows engulfed us, and everything blurred around me, except his face, until my body sank into the plush mattress where I woke up today. When things became clear once more, I glanced around him, realizing that now *we* lay on “my” bed.

“This wasn’t exactly what I meant,” I protested.

Blinking, the Dark Witch faked ignorance. “I thought you wanted us on your bed.”

“No. I did not want *you* on my bed.”

He humorlessly chuckled at that, as though it was the most ridiculous thing he’d heard. “All women want me in their bed,” he assured.

I wasn't certain what it was about his statement, but it made me want to smack him. I raised a brow at him. "And exactly, how many women's beds have you been in?" My wolf's growl escaped me.

Dante's mouth opened to answer, but then he paused for a second, considering his reply.

"You know what? Don't answer that," I mumbled, pushing him off me, and immediately regretting the movement. My rib viciously stabbed my lung. Yep, it had to be broken.

"You need to stay still so I can finish healing you," he chided. "Bones take a bit more time."

Confusion wrinkled my forehead because I could still feel his magic flowing through me. "What have you been doing then?"

Reaching for my head, he slipped his hand into my hair, the action almost forcing my eyes to close from the sensations it caused. He brought a lock of my all-white hair to his nose and inhaled deeply. Sighing contentedly, he showed it to me. It was fully dry.

Eyes widening, I patted my clothes, realizing they were no longer soaked from the rain. "You were getting me dry?"

"I didn't want you to get sick. I know you are more susceptible until you can fully shift."

Awe... "Get off my bed."

"Your wish is my command." His delightful and infuriating smirk returned, the darkness engulfing us both.

"Damn it, Dante!"

Deep chuckles rang through the air, vibrating just under my hand, as we returned to his room, but his eyebrow rose in challenge. "I assume that is not what you meant? You need to be more specific."

"Dante, I swear..." I warned, although I had trouble not letting the smile take over my lips. He was impossible.

“Will you stay still and let me heal you?” he sighed; all humor gone.

“Okay,” I whispered. “But after we are done—”

“I’ll return you to your bed. You have my word.”

“*Not* with the shadows...”

“Can’t promise that,” he confessed. “The *Twilight* is part of me, as I am part of the *Twilight*. If I must be yours, *Cuore mio*, then you must love me as I am... darkness and all.”

I’d expected some sarcastic reply, yet Dante’s statement was so sincere and solemn that it shook me, resonating in the farthest corners of my being. Unable to comprehend his full meaning, or to even find words, I just looked into his bottomless eyes.

With my silent acceptance, he turned with me on the bed, until my back pressed into his chest. Wrapping me in his embrace again, he slipped his left hand under my sweater and laid his palm over my broken rib. His skin-to-skin touch made my body shudder from the overwhelming sensation.

My wolf stirred, but I didn’t have time to consider what he incited in her as a stream of steady, healing magic flowed into me. Once again, his embrace felt so right, so comforting and familiar, so *mine*, that I could do nothing but give into it.

Resting my head over his right bicep, I placed my hand on his healing one, and let go of the burdens that weighed down on me, finally falling asleep of my own will.



# 11

To say that I'd had the best sleep of my entire life last night was an understatement.

My eyes fluttered open as I lazily stretched on the soft, pillow bed, and a smile captured my lips, knowing the Dark Witch had kept his word. I was back on my bed. Unfortunately, my laziness halted when I realized I was not alone.

Dante's arm was still draped over my waist, his hand pressed to my skin as our fingers intertwined, and his firm body rested against mine from behind. Part of me began to low-key have an anxiety attack, urging me to bolt from the bed—the only person who had ever held me when I slept was Isis, and that was only on the worst possible nights...

My wolf, however, was brazenly urging me to turn and lean fully into his embrace.

My wolf won.

Slowly facing him, I noticed that he was still asleep, and a certain glee filtered through me, mostly guided by curiosity. Until now, our interactions had only been either in his beloved darkness or tainted by distress, this was the first time that I could look at him, the man.

My gaze lifted to his face, but it was his hair that caught my attention first. The obsidian strands at the top were long enough to fall over his temple, the ends reaching his sharp cheekbone. It was shorter toward his neck, but the locks formed indulgent waves. Unable to help it, I slipped my

fingers into it, feeling its silky softness immediately wrap around my fingers. His hair was thick and lush, and the layers along the back lifted, curling slightly.

A low sigh escaped him with my stolen touch, and he nestled his head deeper onto the pillow, but he didn't awake, so...

Biting my lower lip, I let my hand glide down his hair, along his neck, and to the front. My curious fingertips traced his thick yet manicured brows, following the lines of his nose and the strong set of his jaw. His features were so perfectly defined that they seemed sculpted, like the pictures of the Roman statues Isis showed me once.

Everything about Dante seemed strong yet finely defined at the same time, the bones below his neck, his shoulders, and the slight shadow of an incoming beard along his jaw. Even the strands that fell over his forehead seemed placed there by design, to make him look absolutely delicious.

The Dark Witch looked nothing like the males I knew. Nothing like the rough shifters of the *Shadow Born Pack*, and I secretly loved that.

Refined power exuded from him with every breath he took.

*And he was shirtless.*

Frowning while I tried to figure out at what point of the night he changed his clothes, I lifted the sheet, noticing his dress pants were gone, a pair of dark, silk pajama bottoms replacing them. Did he leave my side to change and then come back during the night? Or had he used his shadows to do it?

My gaze settled on Dante's pouty lips, and my finger followed, caressing his perfectly pouty cupid bow. They twitched.

The asshole was awake.

"Don't stop on my account," he mumbled, sleep still capturing his words and making his voice delightfully thicker.

The sound seemed to brush my skin until a shudder ran down my spine in response.

“Mmm, yes. I like that reaction.”

“Shut up.” I smacked his arm. “Why are you in my bed?”

Dante’s smirk lazily awoke, as though me smacking him was his favorite thing, and he finally opened his eyes. “You told me to return you to your bed after you fell asleep.”

My eyebrow rose challengingly. “Me in my bed. Not you. We are not tied by some invisible bond.”

“Aren’t we?” he challenged, his amused forest-green eyes boring into mine. The moonlight-born spark that glowed in them last night was gone now, but they still managed to dazzle me.

Honestly, I didn’t have an answer, only the need of my wolf for me to lean into him.

“That’s what I thought.” He pulled me closer to him, cradling me against his chest as I gave in to him.

“Why do you feel like this?” I whispered, nestling my cheek on his warm pec, my wolf contentedly curling inside me. My brain wanted to argue that we’d just met him, but I was a Wolf Shifter, so my instinct was the most powerful sense I had. Right now, it wanted me to let go and just accept the Dark Witch in my life... to just be present.

It confirmed there was nothing to fear. I was safe in his arms.

“Like we have known each other our whole lives? Like there is a need for me inside you that you can’t quite comprehend? Like my touch is all you’ll ever need?” he asked, all too knowingly.

“Yes,” I murmured, embarrassment flushing my cheeks with his easy recognition of my want for him.

“It’s the *Twilight* manipulating you into needing me.”

“What?!” I screeched, sitting up while I gawked at him.

“I told you I wouldn’t lie to you,” the Dark Witch reasoned, then chuckled when my palm connected with his arm again. “I’m just kidding, Natasha,” he cooed, pulling me back to him. “To be honest, our connection goes deeper than anything I could easily explain, but the *Twilight* inside me *is* calling to you because it’s inside you too. It’s part of you as it is part of me. It connects us, and that is a bond that can never be broken.”

“The darkness in you calls to the darkness in me?” I asked as my cheek once more pressed against his chest. It didn’t make sense, but that was kind of how it felt last night.

“You *could* say that...”

Leisurely, his hand glided along my waist to the front, his fingers making a map of my body and sending delicious tingles with each touch. It slipped under the hem of my top, stroking my skin soothingly as it inched upwards, stirring sensations in my body that I’d never felt before, and my wolf willingly melted for him. My eyes fell closed, even as my breaths became ragged.

His touch slowly, teasingly, maddeningly soft came dangerously close to the underside of my breast, and I forced my eyes to open, lifting my gaze to his and finding him focused on me. Dante’s bottomless eyes held mine while his possessive caress continued, as though my body was already his and he had every right to it.

My wolf’s whimper, filled with tender desire and shameless want, escaped my mouth, fanning Dante’s lips when he curled over me, pressing our foreheads together. My body arched toward his of its own volition. Reaching the skin of my breast, his thumb confidently stroked it, hardly an inch under my aching nipple.

A wave of need so strong that it made me shiver settled on my navel, and a breathy moan left me.

My wolf pushed against my skin, demanding for me to be with him. “*Get a hold of yourself!*” I chastised. “*He isn’t even a Wolf Shifter, for Goddess’ sake!*”

A sliver of panic cut through me the next second, not because I feared him—though his every inch was coiled with danger—but because Dante had barely touched me, and yet, I was swept away in his endless, possessive haze.

My body, my wolf, and I wanted to give him everything.

I expected him to smirk, to comment something sarcastic about the power he had over me... Instead, the *Twilight* dimmed in his irises, and although I longed to feel his hand fully enclose my breast, his thumb caressing my nipple, his palm spread over my side, sliding over my back.

He must have seen the flash of panic in my eyes and thought it was because of him, the notion scorched me.

*No!* I wanted to scream. I wanted to tell him it wasn't him. Assure him that I didn't fear him, but how I felt with him. Whisper my skin burned for his. Beg him to continue...

I didn't.

Closing his eyes, he lightly brushed his lips over my cheek on his way to my neck, pressing a tortured kiss on the tender curve under my ear. The spot he had claimed as his. The forceful breaths that fanned my neck while he remained there, confessed how much he was holding back.

Slight confusion still gripped me. The Dark Witch felt every single one of my reactions to him, he knew exactly how his touch had made me feel, even the tender quivers of my legs under him. He could have taken everything, but the sight of my hesitation immediately halted his intentions. He'd stopped himself even when I'd fully surrendered, respecting me, letting the decision to be with him be mine, and mine alone...

Something Ryker hadn't done.

"You may not understand this yet, but I've already claimed you, Natasha," Dante whispered in my ear, his wisps of darkness dancing seductively around us. "Your soul is mine. My claim was laid before I ever touched you, saw you, felt you. And soon, your body will be mine too."

My heart lurched with his words, beating faster, each pounding beat a confirmation of his claim. The things I felt in

his mere presence, with the flow of his magic, from a single look, and the way his darkness tempted me, seduced me, filled me with longing, were more intense and true than anything I'd ever experienced. His presence not only felt familiar, comfortable, and right, as though I'd always been his... Dante felt like home. A stormy, dangerous, and powerful home meant to protect me.

Forcing himself to pull away, muscles taut with hurt, his turbulent gaze held mine.

"Don't you ever fear me, *Cuore mio*." His thumb stroked the length of my jaw, making my entire body tingle. "I will sooner surrender my existence to the infinite *Twilight* than place a single finger on you, knowing you don't want my touch."

Darkness surged from him, shadows swirling and taking him from me.

True fear filled me then, and I swiftly reached for him, my hand breaking through the darkness to stop him. I curled my fingers around his neck, slipping them into his obsidian hair and loving the feeling. "I don't fear you, Dante. I could never..."

The muscles of his jaw jerked with my words, as though he didn't want to allow himself to believe me.

"Please don't leave me," I whispered, gripping his hair fiercely. "I need you."

One by one, his strained muscles relaxed as he returned from the shadows, gifting me the warmth of his embrace again. Laying on his back, Dante cradled me to him, his arms more possessive than before.

A relieved breath left me, and I let my cheek return to his chest, draping my arm around his torso. The beating of his heart resounded against my ear, both strong and soothing.

"No one has ever done that," he murmured so low I almost didn't hear him.

"What?"

“Break through the darkness to reach me.”

The undertone of his statement said it meant far more than mere words could convey.

“Because they were afraid or because the *Twilight* didn’t let them?” I asked, sensing my reaction may have triggered the past for him.

“Both.”

Lifting my head to look at him, I found the starry sky swirling again in his irises.

“You are the only one the *Twilight* has ever let in...”

Blinking, I tried to understand his meaning. “But you’ve used the darkness to transport us to your room...”

He nodded knowingly. “Only you, Natasha. I can’t use it with anyone else, it will obliterate others on contact.”

Shocked, I just stared at him. “Like, *kill* anyone who tries to touch you, or be with you through the darkness?”

Once again, he nodded, but this time, agony sharpened his already chiseled features, telling me everything he hadn’t.

“Have you lost someone close because of it?”

“I have... The woman I loved.”

“I’m so sorry.”

My hand lifted to his cheek, cradling it in my palm to erase the hurt the past had left on him. Satisfaction filled me as he gave into my touch, his eyes briefly closing even as his muscles tensed.

“What about your cloaking shadows? Your healing?”

“My healing is guided by Greek magic, by ancient spells taught to me by Hecate. The same is true for my cloaking, the shadows are just a vessel. I’m a Witch after all.” He smirked. “Yet, my darkness is a completely different power. When I wield the *Twilight* there is no danger unless I command it. When the *Twilight* wields me...”

The intensity capturing his eyes made them darken.

“When it *wields* you?”

“When I let it take me. Transport me through the veil of space. When it reminds me that I’m *its* vessel.”

“So, the *Twilight* has power over you too?”

“In a way, yes. But I am its only wielder, so our *relationship* is based on mutual respect. I don’t abuse it, and it doesn’t abuse me.”

“Why didn’t it hurt me?” I carefully whispered, needing to know.

“Because you are mine, Natasha... The *Twilight* chose you.” A heavy breath left him, and it felt as though the pain of the past finally let go of him, filling him with hope for the future instead... a future with me.

My wolf stirred against my chest in response, wanting it too.

Leaning in and bringing his overwhelming darkness with him, Dante kissed my forehead and cradled me against his chest once more, the one place where it felt like I truly belonged.

Minutes seemed to stretch silently while I lay in his arms, but I didn’t care about anything else, I just wanted to be there, feeling him. My hand slowly traveled from his chest to his shoulder, over and over, enjoying the way his muscles contracted and relaxed under my touch. I’d never touched a man this way, felt a man this way, wanted a man like I wanted him, but I loved it.

Stealing a glance at the Dark Witch, I noticed the look of contentment on his face and the way his mouth twitched in amusement at my appreciation of him, but the smirk never formed. If he didn’t say stop...

Unashamedly resuming my exploration of his skin, I let my hand curl over his shoulder on its way down, the movement lowering the sheets and uncovering his arm. The second my eyes focused on his skin, I gasped, sitting up and pulling off the bed sheet fully.



A full arm tattoo extended over it, just like it did on D's arm, but Dante's was fully visible now that he was shirtless.

"You have drawings too!" I breathed, glancing at his face to find a careful and calculating expression.

Like he'd been waiting to see if I noticed it.

"I do... Would you like to see it?"

"Please!" Gah, I suddenly felt so giddy that I almost clapped. It was super embarrassing, but I was so damn intrigued.

That strange, sweet smile that didn't belong to the *king of sarcasm* returned, and he sat up, draping his arm over my thighs so I could see his tattoo in all its glory. Granted, I hadn't been able to fully examine D's drawings because of how tattered his arm had been—my chest clenched at the reminder—still, I could notice the differences from what I'd been able to see that day right away.

Instead of vines, various clusters of stars extended along his entire arm, forming different shapes as they spread over him. All seemed interconnected by the ribbons of darkness that appeared to move through them. A large star, bursting with light, hovered on top of his glimmering night. The *Twilight*...

"It's a representation of the ancient magic of our cosmos," Dante explained while my fingers began to trace the shadow ribbons and starbursts detailed on his body. "Each galaxy is filled with millions and millions of thriving stars, they symbolize the souls of our ancestors, the Gods and Goddesses watching over us, their abilities brought together to protect what's most important."

His words echoed when my eyes lowered to the place where all stars merged into what seemed like twinkling clouds of *Twilight*, forming a mystical frame for the image at its center... My heart skipped a beat when I realized what it was.

"A wolf!" I breathed, looking up at him just in time to see his smile blossom.

"A wolf," he confirmed.

My eyes returned to the drawing.

The wolf was imposing and absolutely gorgeous. His coat seemed lush and thick, almost looking “fluffy” for lack of a better word. The fur along his neck and head was longer than the rest, forming almost a mane reminiscent of a lion’s. For a Wolf Shifter, the thicker and more prominent the fur on their head and neck, the more powerful they were, but although the image before me certainly exuded that, it also exuded the grace of a just Alpha. Even his tail was long and thick, asserting his supremacy among the cosmos.

The wolf, much like the stars that surrounded him, was highly symbolic, and from what I saw now, it represented power, so I could see why it was certainly significant to the Dark Witch. He loved his power.

“Did you choose it for life too?” When confusion slightly clouded his eyes, I decided to explain. “When I asked D why his drawings didn’t fade with the water, he told me they were made with ink under his skin because he chose them for life. Did you?”

Nostalgia replaced the confusion, and he glanced down at the wolf. “I would say it chose me.”

“Why a wolf?” I asked, more curious about the symbol every second that passed. My wolf pushed against my skin too, demanding to know. The feeling spreading through my chest said she didn’t like any other wolf on him but her. I almost rolled my eyes at that.

“I’ll save that for another time. Now, let’s get dressed so we can have breakfast. You are starving.”

I was about to insist he tell me right then when he got out of bed, but the full view of him standing in front of me in those silk pants stole the words from my lips. I was used to tall men, but the way he stood over me now as I still sat on the bed made the Dark Witch look both magnificent and mystical. All six feet, four inches of him.

After stretching, he finger-combed his hair, and the perfectly arranged strands of obsidian hair fell over his

forehead, making him tilt his head and look past them so he could see me. Although the light of day freely spilled through the wall of windows, wisps of shadow traveled from the corners of the space, climbing up his legs and curling around his wrists and forearms like faithful servants.

Continuously churning and slithering over his skin, they reminded me of serpents, silently gathering over him while waiting for his command to strike.

It was mesmerizing to watch. The way the darkness leisurely stirred along the taught muscles of his arms, shoulders, and chest... he wasn't as overly ripped as a Wolf Shifter—doubted any other race was, given the bodily strength needed to shift into a wolf—but Dante's muscles were perfectly formed, toned, and outlined, works of art. Honestly, the tattoo on his arm just took him to a whole new level of sin.

Breaths began to struggle to reach my lungs with my appreciation of him. What the hell was wrong with me?

“Have you admired me enough, *Cuore mio*? Or do you want me to stand here a few moments longer so you can truly appreciate the sexiness that I am?” he asked, almost serious, but that twitch of his lips returned.

Narrowing my eyes, I arched a single brow at him. “Why are you still here?”

Instead of answering me, the shadows began to swirl around him, taking away the silk pajamas and instantly replacing them with thin-striped, black dress pants. A black turtleneck that fit perfectly snug over his muscles appeared next, followed by a black blazer and sleek leather shoes.

The change was so swift it didn't let me peek at a single inch of skin below his hips and my wolf was thoroughly disappointed. I might have been too. Maybe.

“Where are you going?” I couldn't help but ask, he was always dressed in such a fancy way.

“To breakfast.” His answer was simple and logical. Straightening, he fastened a single button from his blazer, then extended a hand to me.

Instinctively, I took it and stood, his shadows eliciting a surprised gasp when they slithered onto my body—working their magic. Before I could blink, I was fully dressed.

A light cream dress, knit like his turtleneck, covered my body. It fit snugly on the top, with long sleeves and a flared-out skirt that was too short for my comfort. Boots that extended to my thighs materialized next, in a light brown leather color... and high heels. High heels. I'd never worn those. Considering that Wolf Shifters were always barefoot, it was a miracle for me to even wear shoes.

My ankles immediately twisted, and down I went. Dante caught me in time, his hands gripping my waist to keep me upright.

“Sorry, I forgot you are not used to fashion. Perhaps we should stick to flats for a few days, then try again?” His lips twitched in response to my death stare and my feet swiftly lowered to the ground, the boots becoming more comfortable for me.

“Thank you... I still need to use the bathroom though.”

After brushing my teeth and doing all the things, I found Dante waiting by the open doors. I tried to pat down the crazy strands of my hair that stood crookedly in different directions from sleeping in his arms, but it was hopeless. “Can your *Twilight* help?”

“Sorry, hair is not my department.” He shrugged. “It’s Vanessa’s.”

The mention of her name brought back the sadness and regret growing inside me over what happened.

“I know,” he offered, lifting his arm for me to take it.

Remaining silent, I wrapped a hand around it, but before we began walking toward the kitchen, he faced me. “Can I give you some advice?”

I nodded.

“I know you have felt alone your entire life, with only Isis there for you when you needed someone. You’ve endured so

much hurt from the very people who were supposed to love you, to protect you, that it's hard to look outside yourself and what you have been through. But please consider that *this* isn't just happening to you. We are all going through it, so we are *all* affected by it..." Lifting my hand to his lips, he kissed my knuckles gently, his bottomless gaze holding mine. "You are not alone anymore, Natasha, we are all here for you."

The depth of his words hit its intended target because I realized he was right. This wasn't about just me. I was in a different world now, one where whether or not I knew their reasons, people I didn't even know existed had come together to save me, and that affected them too. My gut tightened as I glanced beyond him to the doors along the hall.

"Third door on the right," the Dark Witch answered before I could even ask.

"What?" I blinked.

"Vanessa's room is the third door on the right. I'll wait for you here."

Letting out a burdened breath, I turned in the direction he pointed me to, walking to her door. Though I was hesitant, my hand lifted to knock, but before I could, it slowly opened. A crestfallen Vanessa stood on the other side.

She slightly shrugged. "I heard you coming." Her gaze fell to my outfit, and she lifted a brow. "Cute."

"Thanks. It was Dante." My hands fidgeted with my hair, feeling how soft it remained after her shampoo and conditioner suggestions, and drying it with the brush, even if half the strands were now sticking out at odd angles.

Her gaze traveled to my hair, and she seemed a bit traumatized by its state but didn't say anything. Instead, she opened the door wider. "Want to come in?"

Swiftly nodding, I followed her inside, looking back at Dante before I did. He winked at me.

The room was elegant yet romantic, filled with soft hues of pink, cream, gold, and white, as well as inviting textures, and

girlie, cozy-looking furniture that made me want to curl in it. Nothing I would expect to surround a Vampire girl.

When she turned to face me, folding her arms over her chest, the true hurt I'd caused became evident in her expression. The sweet smile and charisma she displayed each time I'd seen her was missing and it made me sad to know I'd caused that.

“You wanted to say something?”

“I, um. I'm not too good at saying I'm sorry—at least I don't think I am, because my entire life I've been the one things happen to, so I'd never had to say I'm sorry to anyone, not that my uncle has ever apologized to me for anything he's put me through, but that's another issue,” I rambled, low-key sweating because I truly had no idea what I was doing.

Vanessa's brow wrinkled at the same time her eyes kind of widened, looking at me like I had grown a second head. “So, what you are trying to say is?”

“I'm sorry that I'm not good at saying I'm sorry?” I cringed. That was definitely not it. “I am truly sorry I called you that awful name, Vanessa. You have been nice to me, and I know I have a lot to work through, but you were right. My distress and confusion don't give me the right to be mean to any of you. Not that I was intentionally trying to be mean, it's just that I've never been outside the mountain... like, literally. I'd never met any other supernatural—Witches, Vampires, or *anyone* else, and all I was ever told about your race was—”

“Horrible,” Vanessa finished for me, her features softening with understanding.

“Yes,” I admitted. “Now, I realize that although I still don't know the truth, and the contradiction of it all makes my brain hurt, it's time for me to see the world with my own eyes, not through the warped lens the *Shadow Born Pack* forced on me. I want to learn about who you are from you and my own experiences with all of you... I never should I called you that, and I'm truly sorry I hurt you.”

Vanessa's grey eyes glistened with my words, causing mine to sting in response, until she slowly nodded. "That sounded like a damn good apology to me."

"Thank the Goddess," I breathed, and she chuckled.

"Apology accepted," Vanessa offered, wiping the tears that escaped her eyes. "I'm going to hug you now because forgiveness needs to be sealed with a good hug."

"Oookay," I whispered, watching that sweet smile of hers curve her lips until her eyes twinkled.

I wasn't going to lie, my first reaction when she hugged me was to fully tense at the notion of a living, breathing Vampire touching me. She ignored it, her arms wrapping around me and squeezing the life out of me. Her embrace was warm and affectionate, and it reminded me of Isis'.

Although I found it hard to return the hug, I didn't pull away, allowing myself to feel her.

My entire body was rigid by the time she pulled away. "I just need some time to get used to—"

"I know... but this is progress," Vanessa assured, seeming content with our exchange. When her gaze shifted to my head, she sighed. "Now, let's fix that hair..." pausing, she smiled at me with kindness. "We can do our makeup too if you want?"

She didn't mention the scar on my eye, or even look at it, but somehow, she'd known I needed that to feel better.

"I'd love some makeup. Thank you."

# 12

Meeting me outside Vanessa's room, Dante took my hand in his, and the three of us headed toward the kitchen. Still, my steps slowed when we reached my room. The door was no longer splintered. It looked like it had never cracked.

"Yeah, sorry about that," Vanessa mumbled. "I'm never that... *spirited*."

"It's okay." I shrugged. "My uncle cracked my door back in the village more times than I can count. He was always enraged at me for one thing or another. Isis just rebuilt it every time."

Dante and Vanessa exchanged a glance, mixed feelings clouding their gazes, resentment being the strongest one.

"It's fine. I mean, Ryker always said I deserved it for defying him. So... it was on me."

"No." The simple word echoed resolutely in the hallway. Dante's assurance was absolute. "It was *never* on you, Natasha. You didn't deserve anything he did to you."

His words left no room for contradiction, which honestly, killed the little voice in my mind that had always said everything was my fault. The voice Ryker had masterfully planted in me, to keep me submissive. Glancing at Vanessa for confirmation, she offered me a kind, yet pained smile.

"No one deserves to be punished for simply wanting to show the world who they truly are. To become what they



know in their heart is their truth. You just wanted to be yourself, regardless of how different that looked from those surrounding you, and you had *every* right to do so. There is nothing wrong with that, Natasha. Being different is the most beautiful thing anyone can be.”

Emotion reached my throat with her words because she had no idea what she’d just touched in me. Still, I swallowed it because it was what I’d always done to survive. I hid what I truly felt, so I wouldn’t seem weak. So, I wouldn’t give those eager to see me down the satisfaction. Just like Isis had shown me.

Tension grew between us, but they didn’t say anything more, allowing me the time I needed and respecting my silence.

Focusing on the door, I successfully pushed everything else aside. “Did you fix it with your magic?” I asked Dante, my finger tracing the phantom split of the wood.

“No... Bjørn did. He’s back.”

Bjørn... My head whipped toward Dante. Bjørn was back. “Does that mean that Isis...?” The question died on my lips with his gloomy expression.

“I’m sorry... He hasn’t found her yet. But he won’t stop until he does.”

“He’ll find her even if it’s the last thing he ever does,” Vanessa assured. “Trust me.”

My heart sank as fast as it had lifted, but I nodded, still grateful that knowing how much she meant to me, they were searching for her.

Our steps resumed, but soon, I found myself captivated by the room right after mine.

There was nothing special about the door, it was a polished, amber-colored wood like the rest of them, but something behind it called to me in the strangest way... I stopped before it, glancing at it, confused. Lifting my free hand to it, I let myself *feel* it. The energy inside reminded me of Dante’s in a way—not in a “they were the same”, but more

like in a “they were interconnected” way, complimenting each other.

Vanessa and Dante exchanged another enigmatic look beside me. “That’s D’s room,” he informed, waiting for my response.

“Oh...” I let my hand fall from the door, but the thriving energy still tingled over my palm.

Following Vanessa, we finally made it to the kitchen, but I heard someone’s presence there before I even saw them. The room looked completely different in the light of day, soft, open, and inviting, filled with life as a man sang at the top of his lungs—something about single ladies getting a ring on it.

I had no idea.

His back was to us, while he cooked what seemed like ten different meals. The large hood of the turquoise sweater he wore covered his head, so I couldn’t see his face, but I saw him flip a pancake in the air, and then catch it with a plate that held a tall stack of them already. I only knew it was a pancake because Isis had snuck human food into the cabin a few times—mostly things that didn’t have strong smells, so it wouldn’t alert the shifters.

The scent of freshly made bread immediately hit my nose, making my mouth water.

“Morning, Bjørn!” Vanessa called over his singing, heading for the assortment of plates that covered the entire length of the counter table at the center.

How many people was he feeding in this apartment?

“Morning, lovely!” he replied without missing a step, moving so smoothly that it was hard to keep track of what he was doing.

Taking a deep breath, I let go of the Dark Witch and approached Bjørn, wanting to thank him for what he was doing. I remembered him being at the mountain when I awoke from D’s compulsion sleep, but due to all the chaos, I had never really met him.

“Hi,” I called, stopping behind him, but he was too engulfed in his song and cooking to hear me. So, I tapped a finger on his shoulder to call his attention.

He instantly paused, turning.

“Goddess,” I gasped at the sight of him, from true, unashamed astonishment, taking a step back.

He was the most beautiful being I had ever met.

Bjørn smiled like it was endearing of me to look at him with such appreciation, but he lowered his hood, revealing his true self to me.

Sleek, long, blond hair spilled over his shoulders and chest, the top half held back in a knot to keep it off his face, I assumed. The soft yellowish hue was so bright and pure that it resembled gold itself. It was not only his hair, but eyebrows, and short beard as well, the strands lustrous under the ceiling lamps.

Light amber eyes that might as well have been molten honey looked back at me with kindness, wisdom, and amusement as I admired him. His skin was so fair and smooth that it almost seemed like he was made of porcelain.

“You are gorgeous,” I whispered, taking in his unusual features, so refined and delicate. I’d never seen anyone like him...

“Thank you.” His eyes widened the next second as I continued to drool over how handsome he was, unable to stop myself.

How was he even real?

A bit of concern clouded his gaze. “Oh, this is awkward. I’m not one of yours, dearie. I’m already spoken for.”

Not one of mine? What the hell did that mean?

Perplexed, I glanced at the others, only to see the Vampire girl and the Dark Witch repressing a chuckle.

When my gaze returned to the golden man, he winked cheekily, turning back to the stove.

And then I saw it.

“Your ears!” I gasped yet again, stopping him. “They are pointy.”

That brought a chuckle out of everyone present.

“Yeah, it’s a trait of the Fae,” Bjørn admitted. “You are not the first one to be surprised, I’m afraid... Humans never think I’m real. It’s a whole thing,” he whispered the last part, then returned to his cooking.

“Fae, as in from another world?” Isis had told me about the Fae. She met them in her search for beings like her after her pack was slaughtered in Egypt, and the one thing I knew for sure was they had their own world.

“From Kalithdor, to be exact. Bonkers, right?” He winked once more, turning back to flip the bacon, which was one of the few things I recognized.

Wow... “So, you are *not* a Vampire?” I frowned, trying to remember what I’d heard him say in the mountain.

“Yeah, that too. But I turned into one well after my first one thousand years. I was a Viking in Scandinavia at the time...” He raised a fist. “For Honor. For Odin. For Valhalla!”

“For Valhalla!” the others shouted, laughing afterward.

“Wait. A thousand years?!” I all but screeched. “How old are you?” I didn’t even know some beings could live that long.

“Who, me? Oh, I’m in my young 2’s... give or take a few zeros. It’s the sacred way of the immortal Fae.” Another wink reached me, but then Bjørn’s features crinkled. “Unfortunately for *them*, becoming a Vampire after already being a Fae turned me into something else entirely.”

“Let’s just say that didn’t bode too well for *them*,” Dante assured, standing beside me, and retaking my hand in his like there was no other place it belonged. Warmth fluttered in my belly with his touch, my wolf shamelessly indulging in it.

“Suffice to say, *they* never turned a Fae again.”

D's voice startled me, and I spun to find him walking toward us in ripped black jeans, a light grey sweater, and a black leather jacket on top. The hood of his sweater spilled over his shoulders and on top of the jacket, the same boots from last night covered his feet. Sadly, his arm tattoo was fully covered, and my irrational need to see it increased.

He stopped by the counter, grabbing a couple of small, rounded breads from the many trays placed there. Glancing at me, D brazenly let his gaze travel over my body as he took a bite of the bread. Approval filled his eyes with every inch he assessed, and a strange feeling rushed through me with his undivided attention.

Having him look at me that way, wishing I was the one he was tasting, made my body instantly react. My nipples hardened so violently that they hurt, before heated sensations rushed through me, making me tingle. My wolf's reaction to his heated stare was visceral, sending a wave of need through me like she did for Dante, straight to my navel.

The way my wolf and I reacted to D and Dante were completely opposite, but still just as strong.

My cheeks flushed with embarrassment, praying the others hadn't noticed.

"You look absolutely beautiful this morning, Natasha," D offered, taking another bite, this one purposely slow while his hazel eyes bored into mine. The blue flecks within his crystalline irises brightly shimmered as the rays of the morning sun suddenly filtered through the large balcony, turning them gold. It was almost as though they held powerful magic.

I realized then, that in the same way Dante thrived in the darkness of night, D seemed to thrive under the morning sun.

Also, I was even more thankful now that Vanessa lent me her makeup to cover the claw marks on my eye. She had no idea how much I truly appreciated her kind gesture.

When D noticed Dante right next to me, his intense gaze went straight to our joined hands and my stomach dropped.

The memory of D's kiss slammed into me, making my lips tingle. I tugged my hand out Dante's as a reflex, instantly seeing a sinfully crooked grin pull at D's full lips.

"Don't worry, I'm not jealous. Dante and I would love to share..."

*What?!*

What the heck did that mean?

His attention shifted to the Dark Witch, and some kind of silent communication transpired between them. D's shoulders relaxed, seeming relieved by something.

I'd expected our interaction to be awkward after what had transpired last night, but D seemed completely at ease with me, like he didn't hold any resentment or judgment toward me for trying to escape. He'd fully let it go.

My wolf sighed with relief too.

"Then I moved to London for a few centuries, and now here I am." Bjørn's statement brought my attention back to the conversation; he was placing two more trays on the counter.

"Wow, you've been around," I mumbled, pulling laughter out of the stunning Fae.

"Seriously," Vanessa teased. "He's Fae, Viking, Vampire, *and* British. I mean, pick one already, Bjørn!"

"What can I say? I'm a man of the world." He winked at me while the others chuckled, and then gestured to the counter filled to the brim with several kinds of food. Winking was his thing.

With a silent call, everyone gathered around the counter, serving themselves. Taking a plate too, I attempted to follow suit, but immediately noticed that each of them took something completely different from the trays. Didn't all people here eat the same thing, like we did in the village?

I was so confused.

"What did the Fae make for me to eat?" I whispered to Vanessa, hoping she had the answer. "Do I have to eat one of

everything?” I wasn’t sure my stomach could take all that.

My confusion mirrored in her expression for a moment. “What do you mean? Eat whatever...” Her expression changed, worry, replacing her puzzlement. “Oh, shit. Are you allergic to gluten or something like that? Is there nothing here you can eat?”

“No, that’s not it. I just—”

“I’m sorry, Natasha,” Bjørn offered, mortified. “I didn’t know what you’d like for breakfast, so I made sure to have a wide assortment. It didn’t even occur to me that you might have any allergies. I can get you something else,” he assured as they all focused on me. “It will only take me a moment.”

“No. I...” My words faltered, once again feeling so overwhelmed.

I felt so stupid.

Glancing at the spread before me, it swiftly became painfully clear that here, in the human world, people truly had a choice over their lives. I saw it now in the different outfits those around me wore, in the unique furnishings of their rooms, and even in this array of food. I had spent an entire life being told what to do, so I thought everyone else lived that way.

We ate what we were given. Wore what we were given. Did what we were told by our Alpha...

It never occurred to me that it wasn’t that way for the rest of the world.

They had a choice.

Emotion clogged my throat, and I felt even more insignificant because this was all so normal for them. They’d always been in control of their lives. I was the only one who never was.

“Hey,” Dante cooed, standing in front of me to hide my emotion from the others. Placing a hand on the small of my back, he guided me a few steps away to give me some space to breathe. His darkness swirled around us too, giving me

privacy. “It’s okay...” he soothed, his thumb gently rubbing circles on my back.

“I don’t think it is,” I whispered back, wondering why it was all so different for me. Why I’d never had a choice when everyone else did. Why I was treated the way I was. Why I was purportedly kept ignorant.

I’d often thought of myself as smart and capable so that one hurt the most.

“The Alpha would tell you all what to eat back in the village?” Dante guessed, calling my attention to him.

I nodded, finding it hard to look him straight in the eyes from embarrassment. Yet I did. Instead of pity or judgment, I found kindness and understanding glimmering in his forest-green eyes—though wisps of darkness and anger filtered into it too, like he hated the shifters for treating me this way.

“That’s alright. I know the human world can be a lot for you to get used to. Just remember, you are not alone anymore, *Cuore mio*.”

My breath stalled when he leaned in, his soft, pouty lips pressing against my cheek. Dante’s touch sent a wave of soothing magic through me, helping me relax.

Accepting my small nod as an answer, he turned to the others. “She’s just never seen so many delicious dishes from around the world. Everything looks so good that she doesn’t know what to eat.”

“Oh!” Bjørn beamed with the compliment. “No problem, dearie. It’ll be my pleasure to present to you today’s menu.”

As he began to explain each dish, I glanced up at the Dark Witch, grateful for diffusing the situation so the others didn’t see how foolish I was.

“These are French crêpes. Then we have Belgian waffles, Greek *omeletta*, Argentinian empanadas, Danish pastries, Venezuelan arepas, Empanada *Gallega* from Spain, the typical American breakfast with eggs, bacon, and pancakes or toast, Brazilian *pão de queijo*, *chole bhature* from India, *jianbing* from China, Italian *crostata*, and eggs benedict.



“I love Indian food, but this is my absolute favorite,” Vanessa offered, taking the small bread her brother had bit into earlier. “They are *pão de queijo*, fluffy bread with cheese, and they remind me of home. Yum.”

“I’m trying to decide between the *crostata* and the *omeletta* today,” Dante admitted, leaving my side, and walking around the counter.

“I’m a simple man, I’m having *pão de queijo*, and eggs with bacon,” D added, walking to the eggs tray. “Would you like to try it?”

Intrigued by everything that lay before me, I nodded. I was also grateful they had all disregarded my reaction and were acting as though nothing happened.

Seeing D place an extra couple of bread with cheese on his plate, I took two of them too and turned to Bjørn, who was standing on the other end of the large counter, next to the ovens. “Everything looks delicious, thank you.”

“My pleasure, dearie.”

“How long did it take you to make all of this?”

Laughter escaped him, and he shook his head. “Gods, no! I only made the eggs, bacon, and pancakes. The rest I got from around the world.”

Wait. “How?”

His smile turned mischievous, but he looked at D and Dante before answering, asking for permission.

“Don’t get scared, okay?” D began. “He’s about to *blink*... Well, you’ll see.”

The air shifted around us the next second, feeling like the room was shaking against my skin, but nothing was moving. The Fae’s body flickered in and out of existence a few times, and then he disappeared.

Flabbergasted, I whirled around, searching for him all over the room, but he was nowhere to be found.

“Where did he—?” A loud gasp burst from my throat when he reappeared right next to me, a white paper bag with a silver seal in his hand.

“Chocolate *croissant*?”

Shocked, I took the bag from him while the others chuckled. “How do you do that?”

“It’s my Fae nature. Spring Court Faery, at your service.” He touched two fingers to his temple. “Much like Dante wields the night, I can wield energy. I can see beyond the physical world, and sense, and manipulate the energies that conform the universe. Thanks to that, I can also move through them.”

“And he can give someone his life energy or take theirs away,” Vanessa added, placing one of the bowls with *chole bhature* on her plate—it seemed like a sort of soup, maybe, along with a few pieces of fried bread.

Leaning over the tray, I smelled it, intrigued. It seemed delicious, but it also smelled spicy, and I’d never eaten anything like that. I took a bowl too with a few of the fried breads.

Handing the plate to Dante, I took two more empty ones, and grabbing the tongs, I placed a crêpe on them, followed by an empanada, an arepa filled with melted cheese, a small piece of the *omeletta*, and of course, bacon. The others chuckled at my selection, helping me with the plates.

“Wow,” I whispered to Bjørn. “So, you can still use your energy powers even though you were turned into—?” I immediately stopped myself, dreading I could offend him too. “I’m sorry if that was disrespectful, I don’t know anything about other supernatural races.”

“No. It’s fine, dearie,” Bjørn assured. “It’s truly a great question.” Having served himself, he moved toward the table, and we all followed him with our plates now full. “My race is the only race who can ‘remain Fae’ after being turned.”

“Witches lose their magic, Wolf Shifters lose their wolf, and so on,” D elaborated. “But the Fae remain Fae, due to their

powerfully mystical nature. They just become far more—”

“Mighty,” Bjørn finished for him. “And *they* found out in the worst possible way.”

I realized then that when Bjørn, Dante, and D spoke about him being turned they referred to the Vampires who did it as *they*, and *them*, like those were not the same as Vanessa and D, and it wasn’t worth mentioning their names.

“You can always ask anything you want,” Dante assured, sitting next to me.

“Thank you.” Pausing, I suddenly realized that someone was missing; someone I had seen when I awoke back at the mountain, but I hadn’t seen since. My gaze went to the hallway that led to the rooms, wondering if maybe he was still getting ready.

“Expecting someone, dearie?”

Blinking, I nodded to the Fae. “Where is the Wolf Shifter? Should we wait for him to eat?”

My gaze searched the others’, seeing Vanessa smile as though they all shared a secret. When my eyes moved to Dante and D, they exchanged a glance, their smirks syncing like they were pleased I’d asked about him.

“Hannes is not here right now,” D was the one to answer. “He had to travel back home and tend to some royal matters.”

“Nevertheless, I’m certain he’s eager to see you again too,” Dante added with a naughty tenor to his voice.

My cheeks flushed with his insinuation and my mouth almost opened to deny it, but my wolf’s strong disappointment at his absence stopped me. “*What the hell, the Wolf Shifter too?*” I bit my tongue, completely clueless as to what *royal matters* meant for him.

“Very well then. Let’s enjoy.” With a pleased nod, Bjørn began to eat, and everyone else focused on their breakfast.

My gaze went to all my plates, and I couldn’t help but appreciate the food so much more than I ever had. I chose it for myself, and it all looked so tasty. The first bite took my

breath away, and my stomach violently reminded me that I hadn't eaten since yesterday. The others chuckled when I began to gulf everything down, and I wasn't even sorry.

I suspected it was far more than just the delicious food that made this special. Something told me this was my first bite of true freedom.

After breakfast, everyone moved in a different direction, with D getting keys from a narrow table next to what I figured was the main door out of here. I stood there, glancing at all of them and wondering what I was supposed to do next.

"I'm going to continue searching for her," Bjørn offered, stopping next to me, and placing a caring hand on my shoulder. "I *will* find Isis," he vowed, voice filled with conviction and what appeared to be pain.

"Thank you so much for doing this. It means everything," I genuinely answered, watching him bow his head before *blinking* out of the room.

When my gaze returned to the door, D was walking out, and my wolf growled inside of me, urging me to go to him. She didn't want him to leave. Planting my feet, I stopped myself from doing something stupid, hating that I wasn't used to the dynamic here.

I glanced at Vanessa and Dante. "What's happening?"

"D has something important he needs to do," Dante informed, "but he'll meet us later."

"Meet us?" I questioned, noticing two different coats materialize from the shadows into his hands.

"Which one do you prefer?" the Dark Witch lifted the light one first, the same hue as the dress I wore, and then a pink one on his other hand.

My gaze gravitated to the light one, and I placed my hand on it, reveling in the thick, soft material. "May I have this one?"

A glimpse of sadness flittered over his expression, swiftly vanishing. "You can have anything you want, Natasha. Forgive

me for deciding what you would wear this morning, instead of asking you. It won't happen again; you have my word."

"Thank you," I whispered, taken aback by his promise. I doubted my uncle had ever felt bad for not asking me what I wanted.

"I'll take the pink one," Vanessa happily added, grabbing the fuzzy coat from him, and putting it on. It went nicely with the grey, turtleneck dress she wore, the thin silver belt on her waist, and darker grey, knee-high boots.

Unlike me, she seemed perfectly comfortable in heels.

"Shall we?" she asked, gesturing for me to put on my coat.

"Where are we going?" I asked, exchanging a glance with the Dark Witch.

An excited smile curved Vanessa's lips. "Why, to 'see the world through your eyes,' of course!"

# 13

Right sunlight filtered through the building's glass doors as we walked toward them, painting colorful bursts on the stone floors. With each step I took, my pulse raced, my heart thundered, my palms perspired, and my entire body seemed cold as ice. I'd never been so excited and so terrified in my entire life.

Stopping before us, Dante pulled the door open and gestured for me to walk out first.

I ran outside instead, immediately bumping into someone.

"Sorry!" I offered the man, but he just ignored it, sidestepping me and continuing to walk like it was just another day in *New York*.

Vanessa's and Dante's chuckles mixed with the cold air as it caressed my cheeks and nose, and I glanced at them, completely ecstatic.

"A human! I just bumped into a human!" I whisper-screamed, just as Vanessa pulled me out of the way so a group of women could walk past us. I glanced behind her to find a couple crossing the street from the park with two kids—each of them holding one of their parents' hands.

"Kids! Those are real human kids!"

I froze when they walked by me, taking in every second, and trying to absorb everything I could from the experience. The girl seemed too enthralled by the doll she held to notice me looking, but the little boy did. Glancing up at me, he

smiled, waving me goodbye. A surge of emotion I couldn't quite describe inundated my being while I waved back, and I swore right there and then that I would do anything, sacrifice anything, to protect them.

The flow of humans stopped on the other side of the street, with all of them looking up at some red light. Heart racing out of my chest, I admired them. Their skins, eyes, and hair bore so many stunning colors that I could hardly believe it. Except for Isis and I, everyone else in the *Shadow Born Pack* looked the same—raven-black hair, black eyes, pale skin. But in the human world, in *New York City*, I could see an entire sea of different, beautiful races... and I loved it.

It was humbling and undeniably breathtaking.

Lifting my face to the sky, I closed my eyes and breathed deeply. “*Thank you, Moon Goddess. Thank you for making my dream come true.*” I whispered to the moon, even if I could no longer see her. This was definitely not how I had expected my dream to come true, but I was finally in the human world.

“Enjoying yourself?”

D’s voice startled me, and I jumped a little, opening my eyes to find him sitting on top of a weird machine by the street. I knew about human cars, but this wasn’t one of them.

“It’s a motorcycle,” he clarified, recognizing my confusion while putting on leather gloves.

“I thought you had left,” I mumbled, stepping closer with Vanessa just as the multitude of people crossed onto our street, walking all around us.

“He was just getting the bike out of the parking lot,” his sister assured but his attention remained on me, his gaze intensifying.

“Did you think I would just leave you?” The corner of his lips tilted in that sensual way that made my stomach summersault, the dimple on his chin flaring to life. “You are not getting rid of me, Natasha. I’m a patient man. I’ll be close, waiting, until you are ready for me...”

My stomach dipped with his implication, making my wolf brush against my skin, saying *she* was ready. His grin intensified, knowingly.

“See you later, *Meu coração*.” Grabbing the helmet that rested between his legs on the thrumming motorcycle, he put it on and kicked the motorcycle’s pedal, making it roar before taking off down the street... leaving us.

My heart raced when I saw him disappear among the cars, not sure if the sight was exhilarating or petrifying. A whimper echoed in my chest; my wolf once more complaining.

“*I hear you, sister.*”

“What is he speaking?” I asked Vanessa, frustrated because I couldn’t understand what they were saying.

“Portuguese. My brother and I are originally from Brazil.”

Frowning, I glanced at her, dreading that what I was about to say might be the stupidest question ever. “How many languages are there? I thought all Humans spoke English.”

Laughter escaped her but she immediately caught herself. “Sorry, I’m not laughing at you, that’s just a funny question. There are thousands and thousands of languages across the history of the world. Some are extinct now, no longer spoken. Others used every day by people all around the world.”

Thousands and thousands of languages?! I was shook.

“My endearments to you are in Italian since I was born and raised in *Matera, Italy*,” Dante explained, “but I speak five different languages, aside from Ancient Greek, thanks to my exceptional magical ancestry.”

“Bjorn speaks the language of the Fae, but I’m not sure what they call it. Gaelic, maybe?” Vanessa seemed to ask herself but shrugged. “He also speaks Old Norse from his Vikings day.”

“And *Prince Hannes* speaks German as well as English, of course,” Dante added, conspicuously pronouncing the Wolf Shifter’s name, and then watching for my reaction.



To my horror, my wolf perked up instantly, fluttering my heartbeat. “He’s a prince?”

“Not *a* prince.” He shook his head. “*The* Wolf Shifter Prince,” the Dark Witch specified, lips twitching.

Vanessa rolled her eyes. “Okay, let’s go. We’ve been standing here for too long and I need to get to class.”

Processing everything, I nodded. “Wait. What did D say before he left? What did he call me?”

A warm expression softened her face. “I’ll let him tell you that himself. Fair?”

No! “Fair.” Sighing, I turned to face Dante. “Please tell me you don’t have a motorcycle too. I don’t think I can get on one of those things.”

He smirked, lifting a defiant brow. “Do I look like I drive myself anywhere?”

Okay, he had a point.

Right on cue, an elegant black car parked next to us, and a man dressed in a suit, hat, and gloves got down, opening the door while bowing to Dante. “My lord...”

“Thank you, Ralf. After you,” Dante offered me, and I complied without a second thought. Vanessa followed, with Dante getting in last.

My nose and cheeks became wonderfully frosty after sticking my head through the window as we drove along the city. Tall buildings, streets bustling with people, huge adornments, red flowers, and colorful light bulbs were placed everywhere. The lights weren’t on, but their delightful hues still enlightened my soul.

“What are those?” I pointed to a giant red and white hat being hung from a building.

“Aww, I love Santa’s hat,” Vanessa replied giddily. “Those are Christmas decorations.”

I didn’t know who Santa was, but surely, he was a supernatural too because that hat was freaking huge.

“What is that building?” I whispered, taken aback by the breathtaking, and unusual architecture. Its wide double doors seemed to have people carved on them. It was remarkable.

“St. Patrick’s Cathedral,” Dante answered this time, just as the car turned the corner, taking us away from it.

A cathedral... that sounded familiar. “Is that a place of worship for the humans’ God?”

“It is.” Vanessa grinned, pleased by my recognition. “We’ll come by later to visit Father Diego and bring him the food Bjørn donates every week. He’s crazy excited to meet you.”

“He’s from Spain, so he speaks Spanish,” Dante added while the cathedral disappeared.

There were more Supernaturals in the human world than I could have imagined, another thing kept from me, but I found myself looking forward to meeting Father Diego, and finding out what he was.

Before I knew it, we parked in front of a series of small buildings set in a row. All with colorful displays on their windows, and Dante held his hand for me to exit the vehicle. We hadn’t driven for long, which made me question why we didn’t just walk there, but I had to admit that my first ride in a car was exhilarating, so I couldn’t complain.

My gaze lifted to the massive lit sign on top of the window. “*Coração Dançando, Samba and Ballroom Studio.*” It read. I had no idea what the first two words meant but excitement still rushed through me.

“Welcome to my dancing studio,” Vanessa beamed, gesturing to the entrance, and walking inside it.

“I’ll be back later to pick you both up,” Dante added. “Have fun.”

“What do you mean, later? You are leaving me too?”

His lips twitched. “You mean am I leaving your side after the sexy but ‘scary’ Vampire left you this morning?”

I’d never scowled at anyone so fiercely in my life.

A few chuckles escaped him, but he cleared his throat, appearing not to want to die today. “I have to go pick up the food and a few other things we are taking to Father Diego after you are done here, since Bjørn couldn’t get them this morning. The process takes me longer than it does him, as you would imagine. Do you think you can live without me for about three hours?”

My wolf growled in my chest—a clear no.

“You know? I’ve never wanted to smack anyone as much as you make me want to smack you... All. The. Time.”

His forest-green eyes flashed, and he leaned excruciatingly slow into me like his answer was only meant for my ears. “Hit me, baby. I’ve been a bad, bad boy.”

I was only about seventy percent sure his comment was about sex, but my cheeks still flared with embarrassment, my hand slamming against his arm. The nerve.

Dante’s deliciously deep laughter danced in the air, careless and free, while my wolf decided to have a completely different reaction. Scorching heat rushed along my body, settling in my navel, and making me feel like I was burning for him.

“I’ll be back sooner than you know, *Cuore mio*.”

Without another word, the Dark Witch went into the car and Ralf, his driver, closed the door for him. They, too, disappeared among the traffic.

Taking a settling breath to get myself together, I went into the studio and found a girl sitting at the front desk. “Hi, Natasha. Vane said to wait for her with the rest of the class. She’s changing.”

“Oh. Does she dance here?”

“She teaches.” The sweet girl smiled at me genuinely, pointing to the room where I was supposed to go.

“Thanks.” I smiled at her too, happy to be interacting with another human.

Entering the room, my steps immediately halted, seeing about twenty people there. Men and women of different ages stood in rows at the center of the dance floor. Many wore colorful outfits with special shoes, making me think maybe they were pros already, while others had sweatpants or leggings on, and loose-fitting t-shirts.

A mixture of excitement and terror rushed through me for two reasons—one, I'd never danced in my life, except for the jumping on the bed with music Isis and I used to do when I was a kid. Vanessa didn't expect me to dance here, did she?

Two, how could she, a blood-drinking Vampire, be in a room with so many humans? Was it dangerous for them?

*Stop.* I admonished myself, but the other half of me was still trying to understand who these Vampires were.

Swallowing, I glanced at a man standing next to me, who seemed as nervous as I was.

"First time here?" he asked, wiping his hands on his sweatpants.

"Yeah."

"I've been here for a month now, but today is *partners' day*, which means I have to dance with someone else without killing them. Seems impossible, I know." He cringed, making me chuckle.

"I've never danced before," I admitted.

"Me neither. My bride-to-be loves it though, so I had the brilliant idea to surprise her at our wedding this month. And here I am."

"You are learning to dance for her?" I asked, confused by the notion. He was doing something to please the female in the relationship, regardless of how nervous or uncomfortable it made him. He was doing something *for her*.

His smile became brilliant. "I can't wait to see Lucy's face... I'm Hassan, by the way. Nice to meet you."

My gaze lowered to his offered hand, the sight causing my pulse to race with the possibility of touching a human. I placed

my hand in his, letting him shake it. “I’m Natasha. I’m so happy to meet you.”

My words seemed to make him relax a little. “Oh. Here we go.”

I followed his gaze to the front, to find Vanessa coming out from a door there, wearing a gorgeous pink and gold dress with layers of shiny threads on her skirt that moved with each step. The outfit molded to her body effortlessly, showing her beautiful curves. The special heels some of the women wore were on her feet too. She smiled at everyone, her gaze focusing on me for a moment before returning to the front.

“Let’s take our jackets off, and place anything we don’t want during the class on the benches.”

Glancing behind me, I noticed the bench she mentioned filled with purses, sweaters, scarves, and even pants. Shrugging off my coat I placed it there, and turned around, seeing her press the button on the music player next to her.

Vibrant music filled the space within seconds. “Let’s go! You know where to start.”

Everyone before me began to move in unison. Some were more coordinated than others, but they all followed the same steps.

“Side to side, side to side,” Vanessa called in a singing voice that mimicked the melody.

I glanced at Hassan beside me, he was hitting each step with a good rhythm.

“This one is not that hard. Try it,” he encouraged, and I nodded, low-key nervous.

“One, two, move your hips. Three, four, shake those hips,” Vanessa chanted, twisting her body with each step to the front and each step to the back. Honestly, her hips seemed to have dislocated from her body with how fiercely she swung them.

She didn’t expect me to do that too, right?

Even the men contorted their bodies in a way that should not be natural, but if they could do it, surely, I could give it a

try.

“One, two,” I repeated, stepping forward and middle like everyone else. “Three, four.” Back middle. “One, two... Three, four.”

After a few rounds of that, I was smiling from ear to ear, fairly confident I could do it. My hips were not dislocated from my body yet, but at least I wasn't bumping into anyone else—that was saying something.

“Okay. Warm up over. Partner up!”

Everyone turned to the person on their right, and Hassan glanced at me. “You are a miracle today. My usual partner is sick, and I still need to make sure I don't stomp my bride to death. Want to partner?”

I nodded. “Sure.”

Glancing at the others, I noticed them holding their partner, one of their arms stretched to keep a good distance between them. So, I held him too when he reached for me.

“Just focus on keeping the rhythm and it will get easier. One, left foot to the front, two left foot returns to the middle.”

“Three, right foot to the back, four, right foot to the middle,” I finished, and he grinned.

“Exactly.”

The man hadn't finished saying *one* when I bumped into him. “Sorry. I might be the one stomping you to death today.”

He chuckled.

“Again!” Vanessa called, and urgency filled me as I saw everyone else fluently dancing.

“One, two,” Hassan mouthed, pointedly making the movements and I followed. “Three, four, there you go!”

Grinning, I followed him, repeating the steps until I felt confident.

“Turn!” Vanessa suddenly ordered and Hassan pulled me to him, lifting my arm and twirling me until my back was to

him.

The change shocked me, but he did it so fluently that I didn't lose my step. Our movements synced again, taking us in the same direction even when we were no longer facing each other. It was exhilarating.

"Don't think about it, just keep going," he encouraged, while Vanessa began to stroll among the students.

Frantic excitement rushed through me. "I'm dancing!" I screeched when she walked up to us. "I'm actually dancing."

"You are!" She smiled, eyes glimmering with happiness for me. "Turn!"

My partner twirled me again, and I didn't miss a step. This time the others pulled the other closer, and my left hand rested on Hassan's shoulder while my right still held his hand. His other hand rested on my back.

"Not bad, huh?"

"It's amazing." My words slipped through a giant grin, turning into loud laughter when he twirled me once, twice, three times.

"Change partners!"

A shriek escaped me as Hassan spun me away from him, and I landed on another guy's arms, both of us chuckling as we tried to keep our steps aligned. Then it was time to change partners again *and* again.

I'd never expected to dance with a human today or even learn how to dance, but it was a day I would never forget.

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"Thank you so much for helping me," my partner offered an hour later after the class ended. "Dancing with you made me feel more confident about my wedding dance."

"You are ready," I assured, putting on my coat too. "You helped me learn faster than I thought possible. She's going to love it."

“Hope to see you in the next class.” Waving goodbye, he draped a white and black scarf around his neck and left.

When my gaze traveled to the front of the dance room again, I found Vanessa hugging a couple goodbye, then waved me to her side. “So, how does the world look so far?”

“Incredible,” I answered honestly, finding an air of accomplishment enter her expression.

“Good. That’s what I like to hear. We have twenty minutes before the next class, do you want to get some hot chocolate at the diner across the street? They make the best sugar cookies to go with it. I think you would love it.”

“I’d like that.”

Slipping on a pair of black leggings under her dazzled skirt, she threw her coat on, and we crossed the street, sitting in a booth by the window in the middle of the quaint place.

“The usual, hon?” an older woman asked, stopping by our table while wearing a light blue dress with a ruffled white apron.

“I like your outfit,” I offered before Vanessa could answer.

The lady beamed. “It’s a 1950’s original. This place was my grandfather’s and now I run it. We take pride in tradition here.”

“That’s beautiful,” I admitted.

“You are so sweet, hon.” The woman smiled, then turned to Vanessa, lifting her brow expectantly.

“Yes, the usual but for both of us, please.”

“Coming right up!”

My gaze couldn’t help but travel outside the window, to the bustling life outside. I could hardly believe I was part of it, no longer looking, wishing from afar.

“Do you like it so far?”

“It’s more than I could have ever imagined.” Her usual sweet smile returned, telling me she was pleased to be able to



bring me here, but so many questions still whirled in my mind. “Why did you guys get me out of the mountain? Why did you bring me here?”

“I know this is all strange and confusing to you, but Bjørn, my brother, Dante, Hannes, and I had a mission—to get you out of there safely no matter the cost... We were all brought together because of you, Natasha. You are more important than you can even—” The Vampire girl stopped herself, her troubled gaze indicating she’d said way more than she should have. “Everything will be explained to you soon, but I’m not the person meant to do it.”

“Then, who is?”

Sighing, she shook her head, like she might regret it. “Isis.”

My heart burned with the implications, and I hated the doubts that awoke in me because Isis had always been there for me. “Is she part of your group too?”

“Here you go, beautiful girls,” the sweet woman interrupted, placing a large plate filled with cookies on the table, and handing each of us a tall glass with brown liquid and white cream on top. Was that melted chocolate? A strawberry dipped in chocolate sat on the cream with a straw.

“Thank you,” Vanessa replied, reaching for the strawberry, clearly thankful for the interruption.

“You know, I love your hair,” the sweet lady offered, reaching for one of my all-white strands in admiration. “Sometimes I wish I was young again to do all these fun trends.” She chuckled like it was a crazy thing. “I would paint my grey hair blue in a second!”

“Thank you.”

“It’s natural,” Vanessa explained, and the lady’s blue eyes widened in shock.

“Is it really?”

“It is.” My smile was not only genuine but disbelieving. For the first time, someone was admiring the very thing used

to put me down all my life—my differences.

“Oh, I’m so jealous.”

Carefree chuckles left us all, and the lady patted my cheek with care a moment before returning to the counter.

“Debbie is the sweetest.”

“She is,” I agreed, my stomach churning while still expecting her answer. “Is Isis one of you?”

Taking a sip of the hot drink, Vanessa glanced at me, both remorseful and troubled.

“Only she can answer that for you, Natasha. She’s the only one with the right to tell you the truth you so desperately need.” Seeing the disappointment in my eyes, she sighed, reaching for my hand across the table. “All I can say is that soon everything will be revealed. And as strange or unexpected as all of this has been for you, please know that we will all protect you even if it is the last thing we do. We are here for you, until the end.”

The conviction and promise coloring her voice were undeniable, although there was still so much that I needed to know. I slowly pulled my hand back. “I’m going to need more than that.”

“I understand...” With a heavy breath, she seemed to consider her options. “I can answer anything you ask, as long as it is about me,” she finally answered.

My mind immediately traveled to the memory of her surrounded by humans, dancing, and guiding them through each step as though she wasn’t a powerful supernatural creature with a taste for blood. As if she didn’t have the ability to overcome them all in a split second and end their lives.

“I have questions about you... but I’m afraid they will be insulting or hurt your feelings,” I admitted, seeing her expression change.

After thinking about it for a few seconds, she nodded. “I’ll make you a deal. You ask the question in the most respectful way you can muster, and I’ll answer truthfully. If I don’t

answer, then you weren't as respectful as you thought. Either way, I'll consciously try not to get offended. I know there is a lot of misinformation in your mind, so I'll be prepared. Fair?"

Nodding, I took a sip of the drink and my eyes widened at the explosion of flavor. What sweet magic was this?

"I know, delicious." Vanessa chuckled.

Biting into one of the cookies, I glanced at her. "How can you, being what you are—"

"Who I am," she pointedly interjected, "I'm still a person."

Right. "Sorry. How can you, being *who* you are, be surrounded by humans without being tempted to... um—"

"Eat them?" Laughter escaped her when my eyes almost popped out of my head.

"Well, I was trying to be more careful than that, but yeah."

"Your face was worth it..." She snorted. "Well, that is where the misinformation begins, I'm afraid. We, modern Vampires, don't feed on humans." She paused, knowingly giving way to my shocked gasp.

"You don't?!"

"Nope. Not in the way you were told. Our race did once, at the beginning mostly, but we learned, we grew, and we adapted to the world around us as any other intelligent being would. We may have left mortality behind, Natasha, but our humanity remained inside us. Becoming a Vampire was just another change of life, nothing more, nothing less."

Vanessa's gaze went across the street, to the dance studio she had created as part of her life in the human world. Both appreciation and nostalgia glistened in her eyes.

"I live here, surrounded by humans, because Supernaturals have a duty to defend them. There are forces in this world far more dangerous than you can ever imagine. And if you isolate yourself from those you are meant to protect, how can you remember what you are fighting for?"

The words thundered in my being over and over again, finally answering a question I'd been asking myself my entire life. If the *Shadow Born Pack* was created to protect humanity, why were we forbidden to go to the human world?

“I understand...”

Her smile returned, and she took another bite of her cookie.

“So, what do you eat?”

“Anything we want, really. Our bodies are still part human. We *do* need blood to survive but we don't drink from humans, and we certainly don't need it every second of every day. We use what we call *donor bags*. There are places where humans know about us, and we live in the open with them—cohabiting cities, and even full countries. They willingly donate their blood, which is collected into a special bag for us to drink, and we give *our* blood to them to cure life-threatening illnesses. It's a symbiotic relationship.”

“So, your blood can heal?” I asked, flabbergasted. “I thought you were venomous creatu—uh, beings,” I corrected myself in time, seeing her eyes narrow, but there was amusement behind them.

“Technically, we are venomous.” Her nose wrinkled as she cringed, telling me she didn't like that part. “It's the venom that turned us into who we are today. But it turned us by healing everything that weakened us, limited us, and made us mortal. That is the power it has, so it can heal pretty much any ailment, and we use that to help humans when we can.”

“Oh.” Glancing around to make sure there was no one around, I leaned closer. “So, Vampires don't drain humans or turn them into blood slaves?”

Discomfort marred her expression, sadness tingeing her gaze.

“I'm sorry, I—”

“No. It's okay,” she assured. “There are Vampires that still do that, unfortunately. And those are the ones we fight against.”

Taken aback by her answer, I blinked a few times. “So, it’s a Vampire against Vampire war?”

“It’s more than that. Good and evil are things that transcend species. They exist everywhere, regardless of whether you are human or supernatural. There will always be someone who wants more, who hates what’s different, and who thinks they are above others because of the power they possess. There will always be someone trying to control the world.” A heavy sigh sunk her chest, and she leaned back on the booth. “The Vampire vs Vampire war was fought twenty years ago, and the right side won... but evil is never truly banished, is it?”

The burden her words carried weighed on me too. Still, I remained silent, not knowing what to say. The pain in her eyes said it all.

“You know, when I first turned, my biggest fear was that I would become a monster,” she confessed, and understanding drained the blood from my face.

“Vanessa, I—”

“No. Let me finish... I believed that, just as you did, but from all the movies and books I was exposed to during my life. Even when I assumed Vampires were only a myth, I thought becoming one was the worst thing that could ever happen to someone, and then my brother turned.” She chuckled humorlessly. “Let’s just say that there is nothing I won’t do for him.”

“So, you chose this life because he was turned into a Vampire?”

“No.” A brief smile curved her lips. “I chose this life because the Viscountess showed me my future, and it was unlike anything I could have ever imagined. After what D witnessed, there was no choice for him. He knew this was the purpose he had always yearned for. And when it was my turn, I realized I’d been called to be part of something bigger than myself. Plus, my brother would die without me, so it was a no-brainer.”

That made me chuckle, seeing how close they were, and how D defended her after what I said, I agreed with her. They needed each other.

“Still, the transition to my new self—accepting who I was, and what I craved—was the most difficult thing I ever had to do. I feared I’d become the very thing I swore to destroy. So, I did everything in my power not to let this turn me into someone I was not, to save my humanity... to never become a monster.”

My eyes stung with the hurt resurfacing in her, the hurt I unknowingly caused, because of the ignorance imposed on me. “I am so sorry, Vanessa. I never knew, I didn’t think, I—”

“I know.” Her hand cupped mine, squeezing it tightly as the tears escaped her, and I returned the gesture, holding her hand fiercely. “And you can call me Vane.”

“Okay, Vane. You can call me Tasha.”

A grin replaced her sadness, and she dried her tears with a napkin, careful not to mess up her makeup, before stuffing a sugar cookie into her mouth.

I took another sip of the delicious hot chocolate. “I’m glad I get to spend this time with you, getting to know the real you. Thank you for bringing me here.”

“My pleasure.”

“I need to go to the bathroom.” I glance around us. “Do diners have an outhouse or something like that?”

“What is this, the wild, wild west?” she chuckled when I frowned. “Everything has bathrooms inside nowadays. There is one just down that hallway. The door on the right is for the ladies, the one on the left for the guys.”

“Oh. I’ll be right back.”

“Yeah, hurry because I have class in five minutes!” she called as I made my way to the hallway, waving at Debbie after she smiled at me.

Getting into the space, I noticed it had a few stalls just like the bathroom in the village, so I went into one of them to pee.

Once done, I glanced at myself in the mirror, wondering if I, too, was changing here, with these strangers who seemed closer than the people who'd surrounded me my entire life.

My gut tightened as I thought of Isis yet again, praying to the Moon Goddess to please bring her back to me safely. Whatever her true story was, whatever she had kept from me, I knew right there and then that she had a reason to do it. I would find a way to forgive her because she was more important to me than anyone had ever been.

"I just need her back, please..." I begged in a whisper, trying to tune out the voice deep inside me that said she was already dead.

Letting out a settling breath, I got myself together and stepped outside.

A hand clamped over my mouth abruptly, someone capturing me from behind.

"Do *not* make a sound or I kill all the humans here," Kellan whisper-growled against my ear, dragging me out through the back door before I could react.

# 14

Horror pierced my heart like a sharpened blade—the Hunters were here, and they were willing to kill the humans to get me.

Debbie's fear-stricken face appeared across the hallway just as the back door swung closed. "Someone took her!" her scream echoed.

Something snapped inside me with Kellan's threat, and what felt like pure fire rushed through my insides. I couldn't let him hurt that sweet woman if she tried to help, or any other human here.

Claws bursting through my fingernails, I drove my head back with all my might, slamming it into Kellan's face. Whirling around free when his grip faltered, I swung my claws at him, ripping his face apart before slamming my boot into his chest. The force of my kick sent him back several paces into the alley, crashing on his ass.

New arms grabbed me from behind, but I reached back, plunging my claws into their forearms, viciously dragging them down and slashing the skin open.

*"Confuse and shock. A shifter will never expect another shifter to fight like a human. They are too used to the wolf."* Isis' voice echoed in my mind.

I bucked in their hold, making my captor think I was just having a fit. Kicking high in the air to gain momentum, I slammed my boots on the ground, using the gained force to throw my body forward and flip the person behind me. My



captor's body slammed against the harsh ground of the alley as I set myself free.

“You, little bitch!” Barret growled, jumping to his feet as his claws extended, wanting to rip through me. “You didn't think our Alpha would let you go that easily, did you?” A derisive chuckle left him, and he lunged toward me again.

I jumped out of his way, unfortunately, his claws still sliced through my right arm and side.

The back door swung open the next second, and Vanessa appeared.

Barret grabbed me again, wanting to use me as leverage, but she began transforming before our eyes. The sight halted our fight.

Crimson Darkness spread around her eyes, sending a surge of blood swirling into her grey irises until they were red, and all her once soft features hardened. Her fingers elongated, becoming bony, bat-like claws, and sharp fangs descended from her teeth, her lips darkening too.

The being before me was no longer the Vanessa I was getting to know. Not the sweet girl full of emotions and kind smiles, the one offering me her friendship just a moment ago, but a fully-fledged, *deadly* Vampire.

Dangerous anger flared in her gaze.

“Let her go!” she hissed menacingly and zipped toward him.

Using his clear shock against him, probably from seeing a Vampire transition for the first time, I threw myself out of the way a split second before the deadly Vampire girl rammed him. They crashed into the brick wall across the alley, going through it from the potency of her attack. Zain's wolf jumped into the crumbled wall, menacing growls and hisses echoing from the darkness as the three of them fought on the other side.

“Oh, my God. You are bleeding!” Debbie gasped at the sight of my bloodied and tattered coat, rushing to my side to

help me up just as massive, growling wolves began to strut toward us.

The rest of the Hunters were here, but none of them were Ryker.

“What are you doing out here? Get back inside!” I urged her, heart slamming against my ribs.

“Go in with me!”

“They are here for me; they won’t let me go that easily.” My gaze flew to the empty building the others went through, and then at the pack of vicious wolves. “And I can’t leave Vanessa,” I replied.

“Well, I’m not leaving you here, so I guess we are both screwed,” the older lady stubbornly replied.

Menacingly slow strides brought the Hunters closer, their jaws salivating at the mere thought of killing us. I pushed Debbie behind me with their approach, standing between her and them.

“Aren’t you afraid?” I panted, anxiety clawing at me as the others got closer and closer. I couldn’t even feel the pain of my torn fingertips or tattered arm and side, only the fierce adrenaline rolling like wild waves into my being at the need to protect.

“Petrified, but I’ve known who Vanessa truly is for a while. She’s got this, and so do you.”

Shocked by her statement, I glanced over my shoulder at her briefly, before my attention returned to the impending arrival of the vengeful wolves. She knew Vanessa was a Vampire? Did the rest of the humans in this city know about her nature and the others? About Supernaturals?

“The Alpha might make me his new Beta when he learns I found you.”

My head snapped to the other end of the alley with Kellan’s voice. He sneered as he stood once more—the slashes on his skin knitting back together thanks to his wolf’s healing. “I’m going to enjoy killing you.”

“His *new* Beta?” I couldn’t help but question, swallowing the sudden heaviness clogging my throat. “Is Ryker dead?”

Kellan shrugged, uninterested. “He might as well be. Isis tore him to pieces. The Alpha has a Witch trying to save him, but I’ve never seen a wolf survive such an attack. They pulled him out of the river half dead.”

Both pain and relief inundated my being, and I knew it was stupid of me to still hold any feelings for him after he’d tried to kill me, but Ryker had been part of my life, of my *illusions*, for so long...

How could I have been so blind to his manipulation? It was all so clear now.

Kellan’s words also gave me hope, because they meant Isis won the challenge and she might still be alive.

Distracted by Kellan, I didn’t notice Ivara almost upon us. She was poised for an attack, so I pushed Debbie against the door before Ivara and I lunged at each other.

*“A wolf is never more vulnerable than when they are on their hindlegs. Use it to your advantage, baby girl...”*

Our claws tangled in the air, and I gripped her paws, pushing her back and forcing her onto her hindlegs. Summoning a strength I didn’t recognize as mine, I tossed Ivara’s wolf to the side of the building like she was nothing. She fell near the others.

It wasn’t my strength. It was my wolf’s coming through fiercely, and more powerful than it ever had. Like me, she was desperate to protect the human.

Ivara’s wolf came at me again, but I didn’t hesitate.

*“Attack their underbelly, it’s a debilitating injury that will save your life.”*

Lunging forward, I dropped to my knees as Ivara leapt, plunging my sharp claws into her chest, and dragging them down her stomach with force. A half screech, half yelp escaped her, and she crashed against the diner’s exit behind me.

With her blood still dripping down my fingers, I whirled around to check on Debbie. Thankfully, she jumped out of the way in time, her back pressed against the brick wall next to the door as she gasped for air. Her eyes were wide while she looked at the crumpled wolf now squirming in pain while trying to heal.

I never understood why Isis taught me to fight this way, showing me the weaknesses of not only a regular opponent, but of my race, and how to exploit them. Now, as I watched Ivara drag herself toward the others while whimpering, waiting for her healing to kick in, I was glad Isis had done it.

Running back to Debbie, I pulled her aside and shielded her with my body when Jeter stepped forward to take his turn. This was a game for them. A hunt and I was the prey.

Vanessa sprung out from the other side of the crumbled wall in that moment—alone. Barret and Zain’s blood dripped from her chin and clawed fingers as she gripped the ragged tear in her stomach with one hand, holding herself to the building with the other. Her thigh and shoulder were also wounded—chunks bitten out of her.

The sight of Vanessa like that sent a wave of distress through me, just as her frantic gaze found us cornered by the Hunters.

Worse, with her reappearance, Kellan’s and the Hunters’ vicious gaze zeroed in on her.

“Cover your ears!” Vanessa shouted, and the look in her crimson eyes told me not to question it.

Whirling, I cradled Debbie to me, protecting her instead from whatever was coming.

*“Dante will heal us...”* I promised my wolf.

A great breath expanded Vanessa’s chest as I peeked back at her, and a shrilled sound exploded from her throat. The cut-up, bat shriek extended from her mouth in waves, trembling in the air like a war call, until I could see it swaying with her sonar power. The shifters whimpered, many dropping to the ground and writhing in agony.

Stabbing pain coursed through my head, pressure building and making me dizzy until my eardrums burst from the acute attack, blood dripping from my ears just like it did from the Hunters'. Still, my hold on Debbie's intensified, knowing that above all, I had to shield her.

Kellan fell to his knees, hands trembling while he tried and failed to save himself—blood seeped from between his fingers freely until his eyes rolled back. He crumbled onto the street, his form convulsing while I tried with every ounce of strength that I had to hold on to my sanity.

Shadows rushed from the alley corners and crooks the next second, swirling, and growing in response to the silent command until Dante materialized out of them. D landed between the Hunters and me next.

The guys were here.

The sight of them brought the breath back to my lungs, ending Vanessa's call.

Unfortunately for us, some of the Hunters jumped back to their feet, now free from the Vampire shriek. Levon, Jeter, and Everett shook their heads to clear them, barking at D like they were rabid animals before they sprang to attack.

The bright sunlight above us dimmed abruptly when D's arms opened wide, and then he slammed his hands together. What seemed like a ring of light exploded from him, blowing Levon, Jeter, and Everett back. The Hunters didn't get up again.

Had he really done that? I tried to focus my sight, but it just blurred even more, nausea stirring my stomach. That couldn't be right. Surely, I was seeing things.

Turning, D ran towards his sister's side, and I quickly realized that Dante was kneeling before me—apparently calling to me.

He gently cradled my face, his hands dripping with my blood when he pulled them back, and barely contained, simmering fury mixed with agony swirled within his

bottomless eyes. He tried to speak to me, but his voice couldn't reach me.

At that moment, I recognized that I, too, had collapsed to the ground—with Debbie still in my arms. Slowly blinking, I glanced down at the sweet woman. She had fainted, but her ears were fine, no blood to be found. I, however, wasn't so lucky.

I tried to get up, but the Dark Witch stopped me, his face spinning before my gaze. My entire body felt numb and achingly weak, as though I'd been hit by a massive fist, and all energy had been stolen from me.

Vanessa's power was far worse than I could have imagined.

Threatening darkness unexpectedly engulfed Dante's eyes and he whirled around to reveal Ivara jumping toward us, ready for the kill. She had no idea what she had done. A wave of shadows surged from his palm, passing over her wolf form like flameless fire. Her eyes widened in terror as the wave overcame her being, leaving nothing but dwindling ashes in the wind—not a scream to be heard.

She was just *gone* from this earth. *Did he really kill her?*

Gasping, I glanced at the Dark Witch and tried to make sense of what my struggling senses had witnessed.

*"I got you, Cuore mio..."* Dante's sensual voice somehow echoed inside my mind, his gentle touch returning.

His familiar and comforting darkness swaddled my being, soothing every inch of me and reminding me I was safe with him.

"I knew you would," I replied, lost in his once again green eyes—or at least I tried, because I couldn't even hear my voice.

Glancing over his shoulder, he spoke to someone, and Ralf rushed towards us. Carefully picking up Debbie, he took her into the diner before D joined us, seeming as distraught as Dante was with the sight of me. He carried a seriously injured

Vanessa, who fought to stay conscious while she looked at me, her pained expression saying she was overwhelmed with guilt.

“It was not your fault...” I murmured.

Without hesitation, Dante gently lifted me into his arms, securing me against his strong chest. His delicious scent filtered into my nose, the heat of his body seeping into me through his clothes. Part of me wished the suit was gone, and I couldn’t even blame my wolf for it, because I wanted to press my cheek to his bare chest and feel him skin-to-skin as badly as she did.

Still, right now, she was hurting from the attack too.

*“I can certainly arrange that.”* Dante’s voice assured in my mind, and he smirked down at me, gaze pained, right before my eyes fell closed against my will.

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The warmth of Dante’s chest sinfully radiated into my cheek when lucidity returned to me. His strong arms cradled me, his body flushing against mine and making my wolf melt inside me—she had a massive crush on the Dark Witch, even if he wasn’t a Wolf Shifter. I would have thought she’d be the expert in mating, but I didn’t even care anymore because I couldn’t deny that I wanted him too.

Slowly, I opened my eyes to find the room completely shrouded in darkness. “Please tell me I didn’t pass out for long.”

A feeling akin to torture captured Dante’s gaze and his chest tightened under my cheek. “It’s been almost four days.”

I forced myself to take a calming breath with the memory of the attack, tilting my head to look up at him. “How did they find me?”

“Black magic... nothing like mine,” he interjected when my mouth opened to ask, even though his gaze seemed lost somewhere in the night. “If I had to guess, they used a Necromancer to search through the spirit realm, and once he

suspected you were here, your uncle sent his hunters to find you.”

The spirit realm? My mind whirled with the information. “Kellan said they found Ryker half dead, and my uncle had a Witch trying to keep him alive.”

“That solidifies my suspicion. No self-respecting Witch would mess with the dead, and there is only so much healing magic or potions can mend. If he was found on the verge of death, only a Necromancer can bring him back.”

What the hell was a *necromancer*? I hated feeling so ignorant about so many things, there was so much I didn’t know about the real world.

“Necromancers deal with the spirits of the dead. They can communicate with them and ask for guidance, send messages, or even make covenants to bring people back to life. And/or stop others from dying—for the most part,” Dante explained, sensing my curiosity. “They are the only beings with open channels to the spirit world, which facilitates their dealings. Only spirits can travel such distances since time and space are not the same for them as they are for us.”

He paused for a moment, considering something.

“You could say that, in a way, their connection to the spirit realm, is like Bjørn’s connection to the energy veil of our universe. He can tap into it at any point. It’s how he searches for Isis even when he is here with us. He’s always linked to the universe’s source, scanning for any *feel* of her energy. Regrettably, some necromancers are malicious, using their magical gifts to take lives away or bring back creatures that have no business in our world for nefarious purposes. They care about nothing but power, and they will sell their soul to get it, giving their gifted brothers and sisters a bad name.”

Whoa. That sounded both unbelievable and frightening.

“Are the Hunters gone now?”

Dante’s gaze lowered to mine, his eyes once more shining with the power of the moon, beaming in the night. “We took care of them.”



My stomach twisted with his statement, the memory of Ivara's floating ashes returning. "Did you kill them all?"

Lips pressed into a fine line, he slightly shook his head. "No. I did not."

"But you killed Ivara..." I reminded, swallowing.

A burdened breath expanded his chest while he searched my eyes, cautious of my reaction.

"I killed her." Shadows swirled around his eyes, dimming them, hardening his features, and obscuring his face. "And if D and Vanessa hadn't stopped me, I would have killed the rest too. I would have ended them all for daring to even touch you—for threatening what was mine. I would have slowly engulfed them in *Twilight*, and bask in their screams as they disappeared in the all-consuming darkness until there was nothing left. Until their very essence was erased, like never existed."

Conflicting emotions fought within my being with the intensity he held in that moment. I couldn't support killing them, even after what they'd just put us through. However, it was the possessiveness exuding from his eyes, the hurt and hopelessness hiding in his voice, and the irrevocable certainty written on his face as he called me *his* that incited new and unrecognizable feelings to whip through me like the wild gusts of a powerful storm.

My wolf pushed against my skin, aching with the raw emotion coursing through us, and I lifted my hand to his cheek, enjoying the feeling of his sculpted cheekbone under my touch. "Don't ever lose yourself to the darkness for me, Dante. I won't ask you to sacrifice something you can never get back... I'm not worth it."

Reaching for my hand, he turned his head and placed a meaningful kiss on my palm before bringing it down to rest over his heart. "You are worth *everything*, *Cuore mio*. Everything. I will protect you even if I destroy myself in the process. Two hundred years of life don't mean anything if I can no longer have you in my arms; if I can no longer feel you breathing."

His muscles jerked around me as Dante cradled me against him fiercely.

Tears stung my eyes as the tempest raging inside him captured my heart, as though we were connected, the powerful truth in his words and the strength of his emotions marking me. No man had ever revered me like this. I hadn't known emotions this intense existed, or how it was possible to feel them without falling apart. How could I experience so much for someone who should have been a total stranger but felt like my true home... I experienced all of that with him.

Dante was seeded so deeply within me, that I couldn't remember what it felt like without him.

I gently caressed his chest, until the tension caused by the vicious instincts the darkness awoke in him began to fade with my touch, and my wolf rustled. She liked how protective of us the *Lord of Twilight* was, even if it quivered at the edge of insanity.

Unfortunately, reality broke through the sensual haze he brought over me each time. The Hunters were still out there, and though I had the Dark Witch by my side, fear still gripped me. "They know where I am now, they'll find me again—"

"They won't remember. D took care of that after we brought you here."

"He went back?" I breathed, disbelieving.

"Well, we couldn't exactly leave a small pack of giant wolves and a few dead assholes on an alley in the middle of *New York City*."

"Kellan died?" I asked, shocked by Vanessa's true strength.

Dante somberly nodded. "So did Barret and the other idiot who attacked Vane. But she did it in self-defense," he promptly added, not wanting the act to change my opinion of her. "Also, a couple of the shifters didn't survive her sonar attack. Nevertheless, Bjørn sent them all back to where they came from."

The image of her as a fully-fledged Vampire returned, and I swallowed, no longer sure what my opinion of her was.

“She defended you, Natasha.” Dante’s words were gentle, but also unwavering. “She may be a Vampire, and I know it’s hard to deconstruct what’s been seared into your heart about that, but—”

“I know...”

“No, you don’t.” A troubled sigh left him. “Vanessa went head-to-head with two Hunters for you, without a single thought for her safety. She not only defeated them but then used her Audiokinesis to alert D and me of the danger and send your location to us. All while attacking the wolves’ hearing to immobilize them so they couldn’t hurt you or take you from us. She may be immortal but with such injuries and without blood to heal her, she was at great risk.”

Regret filled me when I remembered her gripping her torn-open stomach, chunks of flesh missing from her body. Even as hurt as she was, Vanessa used the energy she had left to call for help and save me from the Hunters.

Still, it was difficult to reconcile the two sides I’d witnessed today. The two sides of a Vampire. I didn’t know what was real or fake anymore.

Were Vampires the evil ones?

There was one thing of which I was certain. “She saved my life,” I whispered, forgetting everything else.

“She tried her best, but she couldn’t...” He paused, his chest contracting under my cheek. “You almost died, Natasha.”

“How?” I breathed, shaken by his statement. “The Hunters didn’t get a chance to—”

“By choosing to shield the human and let Vanessa’s power assault you too.”

“I couldn’t let Debbie die because of me. She was innocent in all of this,” I defended.

“I don’t care about the human!” he seethed. “Vane warned you, and still—” The words caught in his throat, and his muscles jerked against me.

The unexpected agony pouring from him made my wolf howl inside me.

“I knew you would heal me,” I whispered, not a single doubt in my heart.

Dante’s anguish increased. “I didn’t, Natasha. Your wolf did.”

*What?!*

Pulse racing out of control, I sat up. “That is impossible!” I breathed. “I haven’t shifted into her yet, and every time I’ve even tried, we’ve done nothing but hurt each other. I can’t shift without the fire magic, and now that the ancient crystals are gone, I...” My head shook, he had to be confused. “That’s never happened before in our race, Dante. She *couldn’t* have healed me.”

“She found a way,” he assured, sitting up too. “Your wolf infused as much of her self-healing into you as she could to keep you alive until I got there. Your fingertips, your arm, and your side mended on their own, and she fought to keep your mind strong through the attack, while Kellan’s brain burst from it. Natasha, you not only covered Debbie’s ears to protect her, but you absorbed the sonar power that would have ended her life too. I’ve been feeding you my magic ever since, returning the strength you both lost with the feat, trying to *get you back*—if it weren’t for your wolf...”

He shut his eyes, nostrils flaring as he tried to calm himself, but his distress was palpable. Darkness churned around us, but it wasn’t the usually graceful and almost seductive dance his bands of shadows performed. Instead, they quivered and jerked violently as they coiled around his body, fighting the weight of his deepest fear from crushing him. His reaction to thinking I could have died was visceral, the tension clamping down on his entire body.

Lifting a hand to Dante's cheek, I cradled it, my fingertips tracing the working muscles of his chiseled jaw. "I'm still here."

When his bottomless green eyes found me once more, the entire universe shone inside of them, not just the *Twilight* that fed his soul.

"I'm here..." I repeated, meaning far more than just my physical presence.

He remained silent, watching me as my fingers caressed their way down his neck, and his shoulder, once more tracing his tattoo sleeve. My admiring gaze fell to his bicep, focusing on the white wolf that stood proudly in the center of his magical cosmos, looking at me. My she-wolf immediately swelled up at the sight, recognizing what I hadn't the first time I saw it...

Powerful emotion flowed out of her freely, overwhelming my heart.

"It's me, isn't it? The white wolf..."

Dante wrapped his body around me in response, holding me fiercely to him, his face pressing against my neck.

"I cannot lose you, Natasha," he rasped, his voice thick with need as it fanned my ear. "My entire life, darkness was the only thing that guided me. That fed me. That moved me. I thought it was my purpose, nevertheless, sometimes it felt like it was my undoing. There was this emptiness inside me, a need for something more. I never truly understood why Hecate herself chose me to wield her ancient magic, because being so powerful seemed shallow... meaningless."

Pulling away from me, Dante lifted his hand from my back and slipped it into my hair, gripping it like he feared I would leave him, and tilting my head up enough to hold his gaze.

"And then the Viscountess showed me you. As my future played out in my mind's eye, all the pieces of me that seemed meaningless, that were lost in my darkness fell right into place. Perfectly fitting together and showing me who I truly was. Who I was meant to be with you, for you. Nothing else

mattered after I learned the truth. Nothing but you. You are my beginning and my end, Natasha. You are eternity itself.”

His eyes traveled to his tattoo, before returning to bore into mine.

“You are the center of our universe.”

Gripping his neck, I pulled him to me, my lips closing over his the next second. The feelings he awoke in me overpowered my entire being, and I welcomed them, surrendering to the *Lord of Twilight*.

His mouth took over mine without hesitation, and for the second time in my life, my wolf’s desires and mine merged seamlessly.

Dante’s kiss was molten madness—sensual and slow, demanding and spellbinding. His head tilted to deepen the contact of our lips, and the moment his tongue caressed mine I melted into him, my nipples tightening so harshly in response that a flash of pain coursed through them. My heart stammered in my chest, my skin flushed, and my body quivered against his from the passion he was pouring into me while our tongues danced together.

No kiss had ever been this powerful and all-consuming. Not a single one.

Our lips never parted as Dante laid me back against the mattress, bands of shadows flowing freely all about, renewed with cosmic energy. He laid over me, pressing our bodies in the most intimate way. My surroundings swayed, changing from the soft, gentle colors of my room to the dark and moody hues of his, and I didn’t even care. All I could do was feel Dante’s hard body over mine, every delicious part of him.

His thigh slid between my legs while the urgency of our kiss increased, but I didn’t really need to breathe, did I? I just wanted his lips on mine. Possessive hands roamed my back, sneaking under my fuzzy top until his palm caressed my bare back. A surge of undiluted need, unlike anything I had ever felt rushed through me with his touch, increasing as Dante’s

thigh caressed me, stirring feelings I didn't even know were possible.

Frantic gasps for air filled the room when he let go of my mouth, devouring my neck next. "My nipple. Please touch my nipple," I begged, remembering how close he'd come to it last time.

His hand obediently journeyed around my waist, working its way up to my breast until his thumb brushed over my right nipple. A half moan, half gasp ripped from my throat, echoing in his room. Flames seemed to ignite my being in response, wildfire spreading through my body and settling between my legs, the very center that his thigh now caressed. Fierce aching spread through my navel, and something clenched inside me, need growing in my core.

"Mmm," Dante hummed against my neck, his tongue tracing my skin with each nibble, with each kiss. "Do you want me to do that again?"

Now he asked.

"Yes," I breathed, desperate to feel him on my body more than anything else.

He rubbed it once, and then again, the fire increasing inside me, and ripping breathless whimpers out of me. Our lips came together again, insatiable.

"Did *he* ever touch you like this?"

"No... and I never wanted him to."

My eyes opened just as Dante let go of my lips. "Do you want me to continue?"

"Yes."

His large hand covered my breast, and he squeezed it firmly, massaging it slowly as he glanced down at me.

*Fuck, yes!*

He felt so perfect that my entire form quivered. I didn't even have words to describe what he was causing in me, other than my body was doing things it never had. My legs pressed

together tightly, pushing his thigh away as the sharp desire made me throb in hidden places. Something pooled in me and I realized, to my dismay, that I was wet there.

What was happening to my body?

“Are you okay?” he lifted his head to look at me, concern clouding the passion in his gaze. “I’m sorry if I went too far, I’ll stop—”

“No,” I panted, curling a hand around his neck to keep him with me. “I’ve never felt so alive in my entire life, please don’t stop.”

Confusion replaced his concern. “Then what is it?”

“I’m—” I swallowed, feeling the embarrassment flush my entire body, but I truly didn’t know what was happening to me, and I trusted him. “Something’s wrong with me, I’m... I’m wet.”

Naughtiness surged out of him, the smirk fully capturing his pouty mouth. He reached for my jaw, stroking my bottom lip with his thumb. “There is nothing wrong with you, *Cuore mio*. You are absolutely perfect.”

“Then what’s happening?” I whispered; feeling the wetness grow and spread between my legs, dampening my panty.

“Your wolf is in heat...” he answered simply, briefly kissing my lips. “You are wet because you want me inside you, and your body is getting ready for me.”

Confirming his words, my wolf stirred inside me, increasing my fervor and longing for him.

Holy shit. I *was* in heat.

“May I feel you?”

My stomach dipped at the mere thought of his hand between my legs, but I nodded, unable to say no.

Nibbling at my lips, Dante parted my legs with his thigh. His hand slipped under my shorts, down my navel, and onto my fiery center, cupping me. The feeling of his palm on me



almost made my eyes roll back. My entire body froze with his fingers so close to my throbbing center, to the wetness begging for him, while he looked into my eyes for a moment.

Struggling to breathe, I watched him smirk, admiring me while he caressed my skin so intimately. This was going to kill me, I was sure.

“Fucking Perfect,” he whispered against my mouth, and then his finger slipped between my delicate skin.

The world stopped when his fingertip glided over my wetness, ripping a loud whimper out of me, and sending my heart into a frenzy. My other hand flew to his arm, gripping his wrist so fiercely, fearing his touch might leave me.

“I’m not going anywhere.” His voice had dropped two decibels, making it dangerously sultry, but he pulled away from my core, freeing his hand and taking mine. When his finger returned to my delicate center, he brought mine along with it, stroking me.

A lengthy moan ripped out of me, slicing through the night from the feeling.

“This beautiful thing is the most sensitive part of you,” he murmured in my ear, rubbing the throbbing spot with both our fingers, and making me tremble from pleasure and need. “It can make you fly so high until you think you can never come down, and then fall off an abyss so deep that you’ll never want to reach its end. You’ll just want to fall, and fall, and fall.” Each word was enhanced by the circular motions, my wetness letting his touch glide easily while he continued to rub my pulsing center.

Panted breaths struggled to reach my lungs from the overwhelming sensations, my breath fanning his lips once his mouth returned.

“I will show you the beginning and the end of the universe itself if you want me, Natasha. I will help you discover every inch of your body the way it was meant to be discovered, and make you experience the heights of ecstasy and love. I’ll give

you everything if you take me as I am. If you can accept the darkness in me.”

The ever-growing cosmos of his eyes swirled as they bored into mine, and I realized at that moment that there was no decision to be made...

My hand slipped into his obsidian locks, enjoying the way the ends curled around my fingers, his eyes briefly closing with my touch. “Make me yours, Dante.”

“You already are, *Cuore mio*.”

“Then I’m ready to make you mine...”

The universe burst in his eyes and his mouth crashed onto mine, sealing our spoken bond. With each caress of his lips, he let go of the restraints he’d placed on himself for me.

Suddenly, his touch left me, taking my hand too as he pulled away. “No...”

A mischievous smirk captured his mouth as his shadows slithered around my hips, making my sleeping shorts disappear. “Open your legs for me.”

Oh, Goddess.

I parted my thighs willingly for him and watched him lower himself on me. Part of me meant to ask what he would do, but the instant his heated breath reached my center, I thought I might die. He kissed me there, his lips nibbling at the most sensitive part of me, his tongue caressing my delicate skin, his teeth teasingly gracing my aching center.

“Dante!” I whimpered, my back arching off the bed. Gripping his hair fiercely, I pulled while his mouth tasted me in a way I could have never imagined.

The world exploded for me the moment he sucked, and a string of wild moans erupted from my throat. Loud, carefree, and indulging, my voice carried through the darkness as my body did exactly what Dante promised. I rose so high I thought I’d never come down, then fell off an abyss of passion that I never wanted to end.

A thousand and one sensations coursed through my being, all originating from his lips on me, causing my thighs to tremble around him, and as unimaginable as it may be, I wanted more. I wanted all of him.

“I need you,” I gasped, struggling to catch my breath.

His mouth returned to mine, his kiss becoming gentle and delightfully slow, helping my pounding heart calm down again. “How do you feel?”

“I need you... I want you.” The truth left me effortlessly, helping me realize I hadn’t wanted to mate with anyone before, but my entire being, including my wolf, begged to mate with Dante right now.

Kneeling on the bed, he lifted my hands to his hips. “Undress me.”

Sitting up, I slipped my fingers under the silk of his pajama pants and slowly pulled them down, freeing him before my eyes. My breathing caught in my throat as I looked at the magnificence of his naked body.

Nudity was always ordinary for me; it was in my nature as a Wolf Shifter... until this moment. I’d seen all the men in the pack naked at one point or another as they shifted between their wolf and man forms, as well as the women. It was normal. It was part of the essence of our race, not this.

Nothing could ever compare to the vision that was the *Lord of Twilight*, naked in front of me. The shadows slithered over him calmly, leisurely curling around his forearms, hips, and thighs, framing his perfectly toned body for me. Dante was hard on every inch of his form—the muscles of his chest, his abs, his thighs, and even the length between them. I’d never seen a man hardened like this, and my mouth immediately watered.

“May I touch you?” I asked, scooting closer to him on my knees.

His eyes narrowed at me, even when his lips twitched. “We are going to have a problem if you don’t.”

A smile captured my lips too. There was that sarcasm of his again, and I loved it. I dragged my palms over his chest, caressing his nipple as he did mine, and a grunt escaped him. Biting my lower lip, I continued down his abs, enjoying every twitch or tension of his body while my hands lowered. When my fingers closed around his hardness, Dante's eyes fell closed in pleasure, another grunt escaping him.

To my surprise, he was wet too, and I couldn't help but slide my finger over it.

"Is that okay?" The breathless question was barely audible, my hand relishing the feel of him—sizzling hot, hard, and soft all at the same time. I stroked the full length of him slowly over and over, not knowing what I was doing, but exploring him in the way my body urged me to do. I never wanted to let go of him.

"Flawless," he groaned, his gaze intensifying once it returned to me. "Do you want me inside you, Natasha?"

"Yes," I begged, my core clenching in response, and filling me with devastating desire.

His arms instantly wrapped around me, and he guided me back to the bed, resting on top of me while the darkness dispersed over my top, vanishing it and leaving my breasts free to his eyes. I was now fully naked in front of him, and my body tingled with joy. Dante brushed his mouth against my nipples, sucking on them, biting, kissing them, and dragging fresh moans out of me.

I pulled him to me, my thighs parting, legs wrapping around his hips. When he pressed his body against mine, the world became alive again, feeling every hard inch of him over my sleek, heated core.

"It's going to hurt at first," he confessed, that perfect strand of obsidian hair falling over his eyes, and he anchored both elbows at either side of me.

"I don't care," I admitted, lost in his star-filled eyes.

Claiming my mouth again, Dante pressed our hips together, and I felt him right there, in the entry to my core—

where the aching increased with every passing second, where my body longed for him. I couldn't imagine anything hurting more than not having him inside me. I feverishly needed him.

Dante pushed his hardness into me slowly, gently, eyes boring into mine as the pressure increased in my core. I froze under him, my hands gripping the skin of his back fiercely while I held onto him. He didn't stop, but I didn't want him to either. He slid inside me inch by delicious inch until I felt the pressure reach the deepest part of me. Until there was no space left between us.

A moan of pleasure and pain erupted from my being, but it was soon erased by the sight of Dante's tattoo glowing. I blinked, seeing the stars on his skin twinkle within his cosmos, the darkness swirling between them as the white wolf, my wolf, gleamed to life. It lasted merely an instant, but it came alive for us, and it was mesmerizing.

The invisible connection we'd shared from the start instantly heightened, enhancing the feelings our joined bodies provoked, and robbing me of sanity. Dante moaned deeply over my mouth; overcome with the same ecstasy I was feeling.

A smirk tilted his lips before he kissed me once more, his hips beginning to rock back and forth. Sending waves of passion and desire through me, his movements took away the pain while his hand caressed my breasts, making the rest of the world disappear.

It was only he and I in that moment... nothing else existed.

My moans rose in the air like a song only Dante inspired, becoming louder as I lost myself in him. With his every thrust, we rose higher and higher, panting, kissing, tumbling into an abyss made just for us until Dante came apart in my arms.

# 15

DANTE

Nothing I ever witnessed at the Viscountess' hands, had ever prepared me for this.

For the feel of Natasha's lips closing over mine, her fingers tracing my muscles, her body melting in my arms. Nor for the sensations her touch ignited or the powerful hold the mere sight of her had on me. Having her in front of me after anticipating this for so long was indescribable, and I was never letting her out of my sight again.

For the past five years, visions of Natasha were all we had of her. Of her in that gods-forsaken concentration camp that Arnoldt Von Schwarz built in Colorado—after somehow surviving the *Black Forest* battle against the *only* true Wolf Shifter race...

The ReinheitWölfe Kingdom.

*RavenWolves*, or whatever they now called themselves, may have changed somewhat after fleeing to the United States, but they were still as evil as their black magic origins were.

All except Natasha.

The *Starlight* in my darkness.

I'd also seen her feistiness, innocence, an inner strength she didn't even realize she possessed, and her wit. The endless pain she carried for losing her parents, and even her dreams of being part of a world that was innately hers—not the twisted, pain-filled one, fashioned by her disturbed uncle.

I'd seen Natasha's heart, and for five years, I had loved her.

A sigh escaped her lips when she snuggled closer to my chest, her naked body deliciously molded to mine after I made love to her again in the middle of the night... from behind. With D and I so close, her mating desires had awakened—not only in the woman but in the she-wolf—and they would only get stronger until she was unable to fully satiate them.

At least, not until she claimed all three of her destined mates, and since Hannes was in Germany right now, and D was still the sensual yet scary Vampire to her, that meant a lot of sexy fun for me in the meantime.

No complaints found here. I would spend eternity inside her if it were physically possible.

*I should look into an ancient spell for that. The Gods are horny bastards so I'm sure they have one.*

My mouth tilted into a smirk, and I gently lifted her chin, brushing my lips over hers.

The relief I'd felt after the *Twilight* surged from me, engulfing Natasha of its own volition, and leaving her unharmed couldn't be expressed. Deep inside me, I feared only ashes would remain of her, but the *Twilight* recognized her essence, confirming she was the one I'd been waiting for...

For almost two hundred years I had lived only for the promise of *her*. A vow made to me by Hecate, after the woman I thought could heal my tortured soul was consumed by my darkness. I had almost destroyed the entire village after her loss.

Hecate promised a woman, whose fate intertwined with mine, would be born. A soul weaved from the threads of both *darkness* and *light*.

And now, she was finally in my arms.

*"Only you calm the turmoil of my darkened soul, Cuore mio..."* I sent the whisper into her unconscious mind through

the *Twilight*, knowing her wolf welcomed it even when Natasha still didn't understand.

I was a patient man. I could certainly wait a bit longer for her to realize how she truly felt for me, and how deeply our lives were connected.

Just a few days though. I wasn't *that* patient.

Closing my lips over hers, I gently pulled her from Morpheus' arms with my kiss—the *God of Sleep and Dreams* had no place between us. From this day on, Natasha only belonged in my embrace... and D's, *and* Hannes, but that was another conversation entirely, one I wasn't sure she was ready to have yet. Perhaps, after she learned the truth.

As her first, I was meant to open the door for *us*. To stir awake the seed of *Twilight* that existed within her, to incite recognition, comfort, and familiarity to help her *feel* our presence inside her soul—the dormant bond we shared and that had always been there. The way she gave in to me last night assured me she felt our bond as strongly as we did, so the door was now wide open.

And what an honor that was.

Natasha surrendered to what she felt for me from the first day, without even knowing the full truth about me, about *us*, and it solidified what we were to each other. The Great Moon Goddess had interlaced our souls, and the Viscountess, our destinies.

Deep inside, I knew she sensed that.

Hannes, D, Natasha, and I were connected in a way that defied time, reason, or race.

Our lazy kiss grew into a fully-fledged, need-filled embrace, her nails dragging down my back just like they did last night. Granted, last night her wolf had made an appearance, claws scratching my skin most deliciously.

*I mean, it's not fun without a bit of pain, is it?*

“Dante...” she moaned into my mouth when my hands gripped her ass, pressing her into my growing hardness, and



squeezing it until I gently pulled her delicate skin open.

“I love it when you moan my name,” I whispered, claiming her mouth harder, while my fingertip teased her entrance. Her hips rocked against my touch, showing how powerful her wolf’s heat was, and helping me feel how drenched she was for me.

She was so fucking perfect.

When D said he would burn the entire world for her, he hadn’t even scratched the surface. Because like me, he’d also loved her for the past five years, even though she didn’t even know we existed. I would not only burn the world for her, but I would eradicate its charred remains into the eternal night until there was nothing left.

I didn’t care who went down with it, as long as she was safe.

Turning our bodies, Natasha laid on top of me, her legs skillfully opening to straddle me, pressing her center into my now throbbing hardness.

“Well, good morning to you too,” I rasped when she rubbed against me, drenching my entire shaft with her need.

Fuck.

Okay, that was enough.

Gripping her hips, I lifted her off me before I lost myself in her and turned our bodies again. There were too many important things to take care of this morning, especially after the *RavenWovels*’ attack.

The truth was, I hadn’t been able to fully recharge since the mountain, so I was getting weak. No force on this earth would force me to let the *Twilight* take me while Natasha was still unconscious, and needed me.

I hated that those bastards had found her here.

“I’m sorry, *Cuore mio*. That’s going to have to wait until tonight.” My mouth claimed hers when she whimpered in pain, and knowing the growing need in her from the astral bond, I felt like an asshole.

“I want to come with you again,” she whispered, cheeks flaming a beautiful red with her embarrassment, but driven by a desire stronger than her. She was in heat after all.

A grunt left my throat. “I know, I want to make you come more than anything, but I need to meet with D and then recharge after everything that’s happened.”

The reminder of the attack quickly extinguished the need in her, and she nodded, her gaze saddening as the memories returned.

Reaching for her chin, I stroked her jaw with my thumb, calling her attention back to me. “Above all, we need to make sure you are safe. And that includes me being at my strongest.”

Understanding filled her gaze, but so did curiosity. “May I ask you something?”

“Anything,” I assured while she began to caress my chest.

I loved it when she did that.

“Will you tell me about *her*? About the woman you loved before?”

For a moment, I expected devastating pain to rip the barely closed wound I’d carried since her loss, and although pain and regret were still present, they didn’t consume me.

“Her name was Corelia,” I breathed, placing my hand over Natasha’s, and holding it to my chest. “She was beautiful and kind. The candle maker of our small village in Matera...”

“She loved you too...”

“And it was her undoing,” I confessed, my hold tightening on her hand. “I was too young and too powerful, within my first one hundred years of life. I didn’t truly understand what the *Twilight* was capable of...”

“You didn’t kill her,” she whispered, sensing my pain.

“I did, but I never meant to.” The muscles of my jaw jerked as I glanced into her eyes. “I wanted so desperately to

be with her that I didn't think about the consequences of what it meant to be who I am."

"The *Lord of Twilight*," Natasha finished for me, and I nodded.

"I understood then that this life didn't entirely belong to me. This power was a gift, but it was also an eternal debt. One I will never finish repaying because only my soul has been chosen to wield the eternal night, since the beginning of time."

"By Hecate?"

"Not entirely. My soul originally belonged to her forbidden love—Dante, *the God of Twilight*. Even though they could never be together, he sacrificed himself to save her life. Being the only Goddess able to freely access the underworld, Hecate brings his soul back to life every thousand years, returning the power he forsook to save her. That is her debt of love."

"Does she bring his soul back so they can be together?"

The slight growl possessiveness in Natasha's voice, like she believed Hecate would come to take me from her was the most endearing, and unexpectedly healing thing I had experienced. My mouth closed over hers in a demanding kiss, reassuring her that I was only hers.

"I would let the *Twilight* consume my soul before I ever leave your side, *Cuore mio*. I'm yours."

"Why does she do it, then?" Her question escaped through ragged breaths, while she tried to compose herself from my kiss.

"Because she owes him her life. The curse that separates them can never be broken. They can never be together, but her love for him remains."

"Corelia's death must have hurt her deeply. Seeing you in pain when you are an extension of the man she'll eternally love."

My gut tightened at her insight. "It did. After Corelia died in my arms, I almost decimated the entire village from my sorrow, but Hecate came to me and stopped me. The Goddess

knew my love for Corelia had been true, but she also knew Corelia was not written in my stars. Hecate vowed that one day the woman destined for me would find me. And now you are here.”

Emotion glistened in Natasha’s eyes, a tear escaping her. “That is why the *Twilight* didn’t hurt me? It did choose me.”

I nodded, letting my finger scoop her teardrop, and caressing the length of her jaw.

“But you are the one who found *me*,” she murmured, confused, bringing a soft smile to my lips.

“No, *Cuore mio*. I assure you, *you* found me.”

Leaning into her neck, I placed a possessive kiss there, loving the feel of her naked body in my arms as she held me close. When our eyes met again, the hurt of the past receded, the guilt of Corelia’s death forever leaving me. Natasha would never truly know this, but she had just set me free. I claimed her lips again.

“How many *Lords of Twilight* have there been?”

“I’m not sure. But of all of them, I am certainly her favorite one.”

“Stop.” She smacked my arm, and I chuckled, stealing yet another kiss.

“Why don’t you jump in my shower for a bit? The handheld might just satisfy your need until I return.”

I smirked, but regrettably, the joke was lost on her, fear replacing her confusion.

“You are leaving me?”

“Not until after breakfast. And I’m not entirely leaving you, I’m just giving in to the *Twilight* for a while. I’ve been masking your presence with my darkness since yesterday, so the Necromancers can’t find you again. It drains a lot out of me since my shadows have to slither into the spirit realm to do it.”

“You’ve been cloaking me all this time?” she gasped. “Even while we were together?”

I nodded.

“I’m sorry, I—”

“No,” I firmly interjected. “Never apologize to me for what I willingly do for you. Our bond is complete now, Natasha. I am yours just as you are mine, and there is no world or existence I would not sacrifice for you.”

Her fingers swept away the strand of hair that fell over my eyes tenderly, only for it to fall on them again. “You know, I’ve been calling you the *Dark Witch* in my mind since I met you...” Affection illuminated her eyes. “Not anymore. You are *my Dante* now.”

I arched a single brow. “Truer words have never been spoken.”

Our mouths found each other, the kiss sealing our vow and strengthening our *astral bond*.

“What does *Cuore mio*, mean?” The question left her after we finally stood, pausing in front of me before heading for my bathroom.

An abnormally sweet smile tilted my lips with her question. “*My heart...*”

The finally revealed endearment made her face light up with a precious, powerful emotion that I suspected had healed something inside her too.

“Now, go shower.” My words were accentuated by a smack on her perfectly bouncy ass.

She narrowed her gaze at me, hiding a smile even as her eyes still glistened.

Seeing her step into the bathroom, I attempted to have my darkness dress me. After miserably failing, I at least got them to cleanse my body and walked into the closet, putting on a pair of dress pants, a fitted sweater, and leather loafers—all black of course. The sound of knocking made me hurry.

“I just have one question,” Vanessa began the second I opened the door. “Were you killing Natasha or fucking her last night, because if it’s the latter, I might be officially jealous.”

D rolled his eyes, while a full smirk tilted my mouth. “You should have taken advantage of me while you had the chance.”

She snorted. “Even *if* I’d been interested, I never had a chance. You were already *hers* when I met you.”

“True,” D admitted, making me chuckle. “How did it go?”

“How do you think?” his sister asked, incredulous. “She was screaming his name, for crying out loud!”

“Shut up, Vane,” he grunted, but he wasn’t jealous or ticked off, I knew exactly what he was asking.

Lifting an index finger to my temple, I used the shadows to pull the memory of our mating and passed it on to D’s mind. His eyes briefly glowed with the *Twilight* as he was witness.

“Your *astral bond* tattoo glowed when you made her yours,” he whispered, as astonished as I’d been when that happened.

“It did.”

“Ooh, yummy. Can I watch too?” Vanessa wiggled her eyebrows, making her brother hiss. She loved messing with him.

“Sorry. This is just meant for those in the *Moon Goddess bond*.”

“Ugh. It figures.” She winked at me playfully, before concern and guilt clouded her grey eyes, making them glisten. “How is she doing otherwise? Is Natasha okay after the attack? I didn’t leave any permanent damage on her, did I? I couldn’t live with myself if—”

“She’s perfectly fine. You did *nothing* wrong, Vane,” I adamantly assured.

“You only used *the call* to protect her and get us there,” D added, hugging her to his side and placing a kiss on her temple. “And I’m eternally thankful you did, little sis, because

you not only saved her life. You also saved your own, and I couldn't do this without you."

"None of us can," I added truthfully. We all loved her like a sister.

A few tears rolled down her cheek, but she quickly wiped them away, nodding. "Thank you for feeding me your blood so I could heal," she whispered, embarrassment and shame weighing her words.

"I'd do it again in a second," I vowed. Seeing Vanessa so severely injured had been traumatizing for both D and me, making me want to kill those assholes that much more... Thankfully, my magic-imbued blood had supercharged her venom, instantly erasing it all.

Vane pressed into my chest, squeezing the life out of me. She was a shameless hugger, and I fully welcomed it.

"And let's be honest. That's the only way you were ever getting your mouth on my body."

My mouth twitched when she smacked my arm, she and Natasha had that reaction in common, giving me a deadly stare that I knew oh so well.

"Such an idiot." Rolling her eyes, she whirled around, heading for the kitchen.

"How is Natasha doing after seeing Vanessa all vamped out?" D asked, lowering his voice to an unnaturally low whisper so his sister couldn't hear us.

"That was the last fucking thing we needed," I admitted, cursing our luck. "She was starting to get used to the idea of you guys being 'normal' and—"

"And then my sister had to vamp out to get them off Natasha and rip the Wolf Shifters' necks open with her fangs to save herself. Perfect."

"Fun times."

We snorted.

“Certainly *not* ideal, but I think she’s okay,” I assured him, placing a hand on his shoulder. “There might still be some shock and trauma there, given what she’s been fed about you guys all her life, but she consciously understands what happened yesterday. I explained Vane risked her life to save her and made sure she was fully aware of that.”

Not convinced the progress made for Natasha to accept him as one of her mates hadn’t been destroyed, D offered me a somber nod, just as a double beeping sound came from his room on the other side. We instantly knew what it was, and tension gripped our entire bodies.

The Viscountess.

Making sure Natasha was still immersed in the hot shower, I closed the door before D, and I headed to his room.

This was going to be everything but fun.



NATASHA

Wrapping myself in a towel after the best shower of my entire life, I quickly realized my mistake. This wasn't my room. There were no clothes for me here.

My body still tingled from the effect the handheld thingy left on me as I headed into his closet. When Dante mentioned it, I thought it was one of his sarcastic jokes, I never imagined something like that would rouse pleasure out of me. Of course, I couldn't compare it to the way he made me feel. At first, I hadn't purposely used it that way, but the second the water propelling out of it hit my tender nipples, it stirred all kinds of things.

Feeling the memory incite my body all over again, I silently admonished myself. What the hell was happening to me? My body felt like it was burning with need, and Dante was the only one who could satiate it. Every inch of me ached for him, for his touch, for his kiss, for him to be inside me, and it was driving me crazy.

Was this normal after mating for the first time?

My wolf rustled within, sending more need and longing for him through me until it pooled between my legs, and I had to hold myself to the wall, my body slightly trembling.

*"Get a hold of yourself, woman!"* I scolded. Yeah, she was a wolf, but still.

Taking a settling breath, bright citrus notes, rosemary, and persimmon filtered into my nose, quickly engulfing my being as I gave in to it. It was Dante's deliciously masculine scent, exuding from the fabrics surrounding me, and that seemed to calm my wolf's want for him... if only a little.

Walking to the wall directly across from me, I opened a drawer to find a dark pair of sweatpants, and another for socks, then took one of the soft sweaters hanging from above. Everything was dark-colored here, but I didn't care as long as it smelled of him.

His sweater was incredibly soft on my skin, and also huge on me, but it felt perfect. The pants were too fancy to be true sweatpants, and I had to roll them up on my hips just to keep them on, still, the second I took my next breath I was so thankful to have them. Not only was the outfit cozy and incredibly comfortable, but Dante was with me with every sniff.

My wolf stretched lazily inside my chest, loving everything about it.

*"Thank you for saving my life..."* I offered her, still in shock at what she had accomplished when we'd never fully shifted.

I left the closet to find I was alone in the moody space. Where was Dante?

Stepping out of his room, I soon realized that this was the door on the other side of mine. To my surprise, my room was flanked by both D's and Dante's, and judging by the thrill rushing through me at the thought, it was evident my wolf liked the idea of being between the two of them.

The notion also sent heat straight to my navel, making my cheeks flush with embarrassment. *"D may be hot as hell, but have you forgotten that he is a freaking Vampire?! Vampires killed my parents..."* I reminded her, sadness squeezing my being.

*Not these vampires...* my mind argued.

*“Also, he betrayed us. Made us think he was human so we would set him free...”*

For some strange reason, that hurt more.

The memory of the kiss we shared made my chest ache. He’d lied to me, used me.

*“And we already chose Dante, so get your shit together! Wolves only get one mate for life.”*

Huffing, I brought the sleeve of the sweater to my nose, inhaling his scent deeply to calm her. My gut tightened as I quickly realized the meaning of my own words. Last night, I’d chosen Dante as my mate... for life.

When Ryker said I had to mate with him sooner, the thought filled me with fear and dread, but thinking of Dante being mine forever, gave me relief and sent a rush of happiness through me. Granted, I didn’t know how long *forever* would be with him since he was already two hundred years old—even though he looked twenty-something.

Isis told me once Wolf Shifters could extend their life span as long as they kept shifting, but maybe she meant for Egyptian ones only?

I headed to the kitchen, thinking Dante and the others might be there, waiting for me to have breakfast. Just like the first time, Bjørn’s voice reached me before I saw him, singing something about liking big butts and how he couldn’t lie about it.

It was weird, but it was also becoming my new normal, and a small smile pulled at my lips when I entered the space. The Fae handed a plate filled with yummy-looking food to Vanessa, who danced to his song’s rhythm while placing it on the counter, then poured orange juice into her glass. She handed the jug back to Bjørn, who took it without even looking before he pulled a bread tray out of the oven and returned the jug to the refrigerator.

Their movements were smooth, synchronized, almost a fluid dance. The two of them were so entuned with each other that you could tell they’d done this a hundred times. They

were used to it, knowing what the other wanted or needed without having to ask. Like I imagined a true family would.

“Shake it!” the Fae yelled, and Vane did. “Shake it!” she did again.

As strange as it seemed, I could see Isis being part of this world too, of this unlikely family, and it just made me wish she was here already so I could learn why she lied to me, why she knew them, and what all of this meant. Even as I thought about her, I realized I didn’t care anymore that she had lied, that she had this other life that somehow still involved me. I just wanted her here, safe.

“Baby got back!” Vanessa yelled, swinging her head from side to side and making me laugh.

Their singing stopped when they heard me, and they both turned to look at me, their faces immediately becoming somber.

“How are you feeling, dearie?” Bjørn asked, turning to face me fully.

Hugging my torso, I shrugged. “I’m fine. I feel much better now. Thank you.”

My gaze traveled to Vanessa, who moved toward me from the other side of the counter, stopping by the corner. When I focused on her, her vampire face flashed before my eyes unexpectedly, and I swallowed a gasp, blinking until her soft, beautiful features returned. I tried to push it away, but the memory of her like that, with blood staining her mouth after she fought Barret and Zain, haunted me.

Shutting my eyes, I forced myself to remember what she’d done for me too.

When my attention returned to her, pain clouded her eyes. She knew.

“Natasha, I’m sorry you had to see me like that, I only—” Her words caught in her throat, and I walked to her side, hugging her.

“Thank you, Vane,” I whispered. “I’m sorry you had to risk your life for me, and you barely even know me. But I’m still so thankful you helped me.” Pulling back, I glanced at her, her features flickering from a scary Vampire to an endearing friend before my eyes.

“You can still see me like that, can’t you?”

I nodded, taking a deep breath. “A little. I just wasn’t expecting it. I’d never seen a Vampire.”

An understanding, yet pained smile curved her lips with my words.

“I’m sorry I scared you, Tasha. Heck, I scared myself too the first time I transformed... It’s just part of who I am now, and there’s nothing I can do about that.” Guilt suddenly engulfed her eyes, making them shine. “I hope you can forgive me for hurting you with my *call*. I never intended to attack you.”

“I know, you don’t have to apologize. I chose to protect Debbie from it instead of myself, and you had no control over that. Luckily, my wolf chose to protect me too, and I’m grateful you used your power that way. It saved us all from the Hunters.” The conversation reminded me of something. “I had no idea that Vampires had more powers than just being a Vampire and flying.”

“Not all of us can fly,” Vane corrected, reminding me I hadn’t seen any wings of her when she transformed.

“You can’t?”

She shook her head, caramel curls bouncing over her shoulders.

“It’s kind of a status thing,” Bjørn added. “Only the highest of Vampires have wings.”

“They are called the *Ancients*, meaning the original branch of our race,” Vanessa explained.

“Like the first ones to *ever* exist?”

“Yes, *and* no,” the Fae corrected.

*Only the highest of Vampires...* “But D had wings,” I interjected, confused. “What does that make him?”

“Well, the *Ancients* come from the first, original Vampiress, but my brother was—”

Bjørn cleared his throat forcefully, bringing her attention to him and giving her a pointed look.

“Sorry, I know there is a lot you need to learn about us, but I don’t want to take the opportunity from my brother to tell you about his story himself. In the meantime, I’d love to answer anything else about my journey and our race in general. Hopefully, that will make it easier for you to get used to us. To understand us.”

I understood what she meant, so I just nodded. “I’d appreciate that.”

She hugged me that time, and I embraced her too, feeling a set of bulking arms wrapping around us both.

“Aww, I love a good reconciliation, mate. It’s beautiful!”

Chuckling, we looked up at the Fae, who placed a kiss on our temples, like I assumed a father might do with his children. “Now, let’s eat.”

“Wait, are you wearing Dante’s clothes?” Vanessa asked, her perfectly manicured brow knowingly arching with the question.

My cheeks heated as I looked at both of them, low-key panicking. I did not think that through. “I-I—”

“Ignore her. Vane is just messing with you,” Bjørn assured, resuming his breakfast duties, and placing the bread on the counter. “We know you and Dante are together now, dearie, and we are very happy for you both.”

“It was about time, if you ask me,” Vane added with a cheeky grin. “You’ve been super chummy with him since you met.” She winked at me like she was in on the secret. “Can’t blame you though. It takes one look at him to know he’s absolutely scrumptious in bed.”

Cheeks still as red as strawberries, I chuckled. Sure, I was surprised at their casual and lighthearted mention of our mating and intimacy, but I found myself liking their daring humor—it made me feel a bit bold too. “Scrumptious is not even the right word; I almost didn’t let him off the bed.”

“Oooh!!” Bjørn shouted. “I’m glad to see that he knows what he’s doing. I thought I was going to have to teach him a thing or two.” He winked.

“Hey, I wanted to have Dante for breakfast too, but I think he ran away.”

Our laughter mixed in the air, making me truly relish their company. I’d never had anything like this. Back in the village, mating was private. All mates were assigned by the Alpha, and he announced the new pairings to the pack. No one talked about it afterward, we just accepted it.

I’d probably would have died of embarrassment if anyone even asked about my mating there, but it was all so normal here. Bjørn, Vanessa, and the others were so open with each other, and trusting, so free.

“I bet your she-wolf was too much for the mighty *Lord of Twilight*,” Vane teased, popping a slice of sausage into her mouth while we stood around the counter.

Bjørn pouted. “Awe. Scared little Witch.”

My hand flew to my stomach, mirth twisting my insides, I’d never laughed so hard that it actually hurt. Reaching for a piece of bacon, I chewed on it, realizing I was starving.

“Since you don’t have a Dante to sink your canines into right now, can we please eat?” Vane joked, grabbing a plate, and beginning to serve herself.

I glanced at the hallway behind me. “Let me just go get him.”

“Drag my brother here while you are at it. He gets mad when we start without him, but dude, a girl’s gotta eat.”

With a nod, I headed back to the bedrooms.

Walking past my room, I stopped before Dante's, but voices reached me from the other side of D's door. Curiosity got the best of me, and I walked toward it, soon realizing that Dante and D were there, but there was also a woman...

A jealous growl attempted to rip through my throat, but I forced it back down, swallowing it. My wolf did not like that. She *did not* like that one bit. With her anger stirring within my chest, I opened the door and stepped inside the room, trying to find out what was going on there. A small entry space with two chairs and a mirror greeted me. They were not there.

"How could you allow that to happen?!" the woman suddenly raged, clearly upset out of her mind.

The protectiveness and ire driving her words stopped me in my tracks, this was not at all what my wolf suspected.

"Viscountess, we never thought—"

"You didn't think?" she cynically interrupted Dante. "I trusted you to protect the most important being in this world and you *didn't think* the *RavenWolves* would find a way to get to her again?"

My pulse began to race with her words. Were they talking about me? And who the hell were the *RavenWolves*?

"They will kill anyone to get to her!" she raged. "How could you be so careless knowing everything you know? After everything I've done for you?!"

Mind racing out of control with questions, I walked farther in, peeking around the corner of the entry wall to the actual room. Both Dante and D stood in front of a desk with a large screen on it. Unfortunately, I couldn't see the face of the woman. Was that a computer?

D's hands fisted at his sides. "With all due respect, Viscountess, we have risked our lives for her too, and we wouldn't put Natasha in danger so recklessly. This was not our fault, and you should know I would *never*—"

"We are sorry you are disappointed, Viscountess," Dante interjected, addressing her in a more tactful way than D had.



I suspected he'd also, stopped D from accidentally insulting her or saying something he would regret. Whoever the Viscountess was, she seemed to command respect from them, even if D was pissed off out of politeness.

"But no one could have expected them to use Necromancers to track us here," Dante finished.

"Necromancers?" the woman gasped, seeming disturbed by the notion.

"We are in *New York City*, there is no way they would have found us here after we took her from Colorado, if not for the help of black magic. Yesterday, Vanessa fought two Wolf Shifters on her own to get them off Natasha, and the state they left her in..." Dante paused, his hands fisting too. "There were parts of her body missing, Viscountess. I had to feed her my mystical blood to help her fully heal, knowing that neither magic nor blood alone would be strong enough in her state."

Shock and horror swept through me at the thought of Vanessa drinking his blood. Swallowing, I took a step back, but I couldn't make myself leave. I needed to know who that woman was, and why they were talking about me.

*The Viscountess...*

I abruptly remembered Vanessa mentioning her when she told me about her story, and even Dante had mentioned her last night when he confessed how he felt about me. That woman had shown each of them their future, and for some reason, I was part of it.

"I spent the entire day and night helping Natasha and her wolf regain the energy lost during the altercation because they gave everything to save that human. Even as I stand before you now, I'm using what is left of my shadows to actively block the Necromancer from finding her again, and I'm truly exhausted... But I'm still here." Pausing, he straightened. "I know the turn of events is upsetting for you, Viscountess. I understand it because it affects us too."

A long, loaded sigh left the woman. "Something greater is going on here if Arnoldt is using a Necromancer to try to find

her,” she replied, her ire receding, and telling me how extreme of a measure that was. “Forgive me for my outburst. Of course, I appreciate everything you’ve done and continue to do for Natasha. Your sacrifices never go unnoticed. It’s just hard—”

“We know,” D answered, his voice kinder this time. “We know how much you’ve sacrificed too.”

“I’m sorry to hear about Vanessa,” she added, her tone grave and deeply saddened. “I hope she is fully healed now.”

“She is.”

“I’m glad. D, please thank her for me, I appreciate what she did more than you can imagine. Dante, please do whatever it takes to recover, I need you all safe and sound...” Tension grew with her pause, and the guys tensed in anticipation of her next question. “Does Natasha know the truth?”

“Isis hasn’t been found yet,” D was the one to answer, his voice heavy.

“No. We cannot lose Isis...” A sigh of frustration left the woman. “You *need* to find her,” she begged, though her commanding voice didn’t falter. “We have come too far and waited too long for everything to fall apart now.”

“Bjorn is constantly searching for her energy,” Dante assured. “He won’t stop, no matter what happens.”

“I believe you... Has Natasha begun trusting you yet? Let any of you close?”

“She has. Last night, she gave in to how she felt for me. The first bond is complete,” Dante confessed to the woman, his words slicing through me like betrayal.

“And with you, D?”

“Not yet, Viscountess...” His eyes connected with Dante’s, and they exchanged a troubled glance. “There is a *certain* aversion to Vampires she must overcome first.”

Once more, the silence stretched between them, the news appearing to upset the woman.

“I suppose I should have expected that,” she murmured, seeming disappointed, before clearing her throat. “Well, one bond is more than I expected considering the circumstances. That will have to do for now, I cannot risk her being there anymore.”

Dante adamantly shook his head. “We can’t leave until Isis is with us—”

“Bjørn will stay behind to continue searching for her,” the Viscountess pressed.

“We *never* leave anyone behind,” D insisted.

“This is not a discussion. Bring Natasha to me, now!” The sound of her hands hitting the desk on her side of the screen echoed in the room.

The power expelling from her words seemed to reach for me across the distance, my skin tingling as though she’d grabbed me. My gasp reverberated throughout the space.

Whirling around, Dante’s and D’s eyes settled on me, dread clouding them.

“*Caralho!*” D cursed under his breath.

I stared at the man I’d just mated with, the one who deceived me too.

“Natasha...” Dante reached for me.

“Don’t touch me.” I pulled away, taking a step back. My heart sank as I glanced up at him. “Why does everyone I choose to love lie to me?”

My question went unanswered as I turned, rushing out of the room.

“Go after her!” the Viscountess ordered.

Tears stung my eyes as I ran past the kitchen, toward the entrance of the apartment.

“Tasha, what happened?” Vanessa’s words were lost when I swung the large door open and ran to the elevator.

Stepping in, I slammed my hand against the panel, pressing the button that would get me the hell away from there. Nothing. The elevator didn’t move.

“Damn it, take me out of here!” I growled at it, hitting the buttons over and over until Bjørn appeared on the other side of the still-open doors.

Beyond him, Vanessa arrived, just as D and Dante reached her.

“*Don’t* come any closer!” I ordered, pointing at them while treacherous tears fell down my face. “I don’t want you anywhere near me. You are not taking me to whoever the hell that woman is, you understand? I’m not going anywhere with you!”

Hurt cut across Dante and D’s faces with my words, but a sliver of understanding entered Bjørn’s expression, followed by genuine concern. I dragged my gaze away from Dante, unable to look at him anymore.

“I can help you leave,” the Fae offered, his words gentle.

Struggling with the ache slashing through me, I looked into his ancient, wise eyes, searching for something. I couldn’t help but still trust him, maybe to my detriment. Stepping back

from the panel, I let him enter the elevator. He pressed his thumb to the panel until it lit up, and then pushed the button I had hit so many times—a tiny bell ringing.

Dante and D stepped forward, seeming physically impossible for them to let me go, but Bjørn shook his head once, letting them know not to follow as the doors slid close in their faces.

Covering my face with both hands, I tried to swallow the pain attempting to consume me. Was there anyone I could truly trust here?

“You can trust me,” Bjørn whispered, making my hands fall.

“How did you do that?” I blinked, wiping the tears that escaped me.

His nose crinkled. “It’s a Fae thing. I’m sorry, I’m pretty good at blocking everyone else’s thoughts but your hurt is practically screaming at me right now. I just wanted you to know that even though it feels like everyone is betraying you, not everything is as it seems.”

The doors opened to the lobby then, so my gaze went past him to the double glass doors, and to the park on the other side of the street.

“You haven’t been to *Central Park* yet, have you?”

I shook my head, my attention returning to him.

“Well, you are going to need shoes.” The sight of him trembled in the air before he *blinked* away. A second later he was back with a pair of boots from my closet, and a pretty purple coat. “A little bird told me purple is your favorite color.”

My heart squeezed with his reference to Isis, and I nodded.

He helped put the coat on me, behaving once more like a father probably would, and then knelt to get my feet into the boots.

When we reached the doors and stepped outside of the building, Bjørn offered me his arm. “You can always count on

me, dearie.”

Feeling the honesty in that statement reverberate through my entire being, I took his arm, letting him guide me across the street.

With each step we took, I realized that the space was filled with life, laughter, and joy, directly contradicting the way I felt right now. Children played near the lake, some adults read a book, while couples walked hand in hand, and adolescents threw a ball at each other, catching it and throwing it back. Someone rode a bicycle right by us, and there were even small carts selling hot dogs, popcorn, and roasted nuts.

It was beyond me why humans would want to eat a dog, hot or otherwise, but everything smelled delicious.

The interaction fascinated me, and admittedly, it distracted me for a while as we strolled in silence. We even walked under a carved stone bridge, until Bjørn finally stopped, apparently arriving at our destination.

In front of us was a strange, circular contraption with lots of colorful replicas of animals on it. “Horses! Those are horses,” I gasped, bringing a smile out of the Fae.

“The first time I ever saw a carousel was at a fair in 18<sup>th</sup> century, London. Nothing this shiny or modern but it was still a great experience... Do you want to go on it?”

My gaze swept the area, seeing mostly children go on the ride, though a few adults entered as well. A few of them were couples. Both wonder and excitement filter into me with the idea, and I couldn't help but nod. Bjørn walked me through the line, and we stepped onto the platform, going between the single-horse statues to find a couple that were attached to a chariot.

“After you.” He gestured for me to go first, so I sat in the chariot, seeing him take the spot next to me.

Joyful music suddenly began to play, and colorful lights adorned everything in sight, then we were moving. The carousel went around and around while the beautifully painted

horses jumped up and down, making children giggle. It was the most magical thing I had ever experienced.

“Thank you for bringing me here, it’s helped me calm down,” I offered when we stepped down, wishing we could just ride the carousel forever.

“You misunderstand, dearie. I didn’t bring you here to calm down. You are entitled to feel everything you are feeling. If you want to hate their guts, I’ll hate them with you for as long as you want.”

“What do you mean?” I asked while he walked us close to a great fountain with lots of people sitting around it.

“What I mean is, you’ve gone through a lot in the past few days, and it’s normal to feel the way you feel.” Leaving the fountain, Bjørn’s gaze found my eyes. “You deserve some answers, Natasha, and I’m sorry that it’s taken so long. Ask me anything you want, and I’ll be honest with you.”

My eyes narrowed at him. “You’ll answer my questions as long as it has to do with your own story?”

The Fae shook his head. “I’ll answer anything I can for you, whether they want me to or not.”

My forehead crinkled as we sat in front of the fountain. “Why would you do that?”

Exhaling deeply, he paused for a moment. “Because I’m not willing to risk my relationship with you to keep someone else’s secrets.”

Taken aback by his response, I faced him fully on the bench. “You’ll tell me everything I want to know?”

“Well, not everything, *everything*.”

I arched a challenging brow at him, watching a cheeky grin capture Bjørn’s mouth.

Goddess, my wolf almost swooned for him too. He was truly a gorgeous man.

“Before we begin, there are three rules you need to know,” he continued, “because this is the first time you’ve ever dealt

with a Fae.”

“Like what?”

“Number one, never *fully* believe what we say. We are known for manipulating the truth a tad little bit.”

My brow wrinkled at that, making him grin even wider. “Number two?”

“There are things I truly can’t tell you because I swore not to. But if you don’t get the answer you wanted, ask again in a different manner. There are always ways to cheat the system.” He winked.

“And three?”

“Learn to read between the lines.”

“What do you get out of this?”

He shrugged. “Oh, I don’t know, your peace of mind...”

“Won’t you get in trouble for telling me things?”

A mischievous glimmer entered his amber eyes as he crossed his legs, draping an arm over the back of the seat. “I’m older than all of them combined, dearie. What can they possibly do to me?”

Pressing my shoulder to the bench, I bit at my lower lip. “Who is the Viscountess?”

“She’s the woman who brought us all together.”

My eyes narrowed at him, and he narrowed his right back, an eyebrow arching as though I should know what to do next.

*Right, ask in a different way.* “Does the Viscountess have power over any of you? And if so, why?”

A loaded sigh expanded his chest, and I knew I’d asked the right question.

“Perhaps not the kind of power you think, but she means something to us, even if it is different for each of us,” he confessed. “I met her long before she became the Viscountess. Long before I became who I am today. She was the only one who searched for me when I got lost in the creature I’d



become after *they* tried to make a Vampire—not knowing what the combination of the venom and the Fae magic already within me would turn me into... a monster.”

“You could never be a monster,” I interjected, looking up into his wise and gentle eyes.

A saddened smile bowed his lips, and he placed his hand on mine.

“We are all capable of becoming monsters, dearie. The wolf inside you could turn into one if you let your fear and hurt, or your need for revenge take over your heart. It all depends on whether we choose to remain true to ourselves or not. To the humans in Egypt, Isis’ race were the monsters, so they eradicated them to save themselves, then fell prey to the very creatures Isis’ pack was trying to protect them from... Ironic, right?”

“Goddess, I didn’t know.” My heart hurt for her, being betrayed by those you gave everything to protect must have devastated her.

“Hmm. Anastasia found me and brought me back. She reminded me of who I truly was, so I could leave the monster behind and never allow it to take over again. For that, I owe her everything... When she called on me for help, I immediately answered.” Squeezing my hand, he let go, glancing back at the fountain.

“Anastasia...” The name easily rolled over my tongue. It was truly a beautiful name.

“She is a powerful Vampiress, the head of the North American clan, and second only to Countess Dariah Dracul—the origin of the Vampiri race.”

“Wait, the North American clan?! How many Vampires are there?” I all but squealed, making laughter erupt from Bjørn.

“Oh, dearie. It’s a good thing you are sitting down,” he snickered. “Let’s see, we have the original Romanian Dynasty, then a clan in France, one in Spain, Austria, and Rome, one for all of North America, one for East Asia, and one for the rest of the now consolidated Europe. We are currently working on

appointing the future heads of the South Asian, Australian, and South American clans.”

By his mention of France, my mouth had dropped wide open, and I wasn't sure I could close it again. My back bounced against the bench as I let my weight fall, focusing on the soothing falling water. “Are they all, regular, human-looking—?”

“Two arms, two legs kind of people?” he finished for me. “Yeah. All Vampires look like humans...” His features obscured as he thought about it. “Not all of them do. There is a branch of force-fed creatures called *the crawlers*. Trust me, you never want to see one of those. They were created long ago though, when the *Străbun Dynasties* still held all the power, way *before* they lost the Vampiri War.”

“Evil Vampires?” I asked, putting it in a very simplistic way for sure, after how complicated the Vampire history seemed from what he explained.

An endearing smile lifted his lips, and he patted my hand. “Yes, the evil Vampires.”

“Were those the ones who tried to turn you?” I asked, knowing how he and the guys always made a point to differentiate themselves from the *others* whenever they mentioned Bjørn being turned.

He nodded; his gaze lost somewhere in the past.

Taking a deep breath, I tried to process everything he'd told me, but circled back to what was important now. “You said the Viscountess holds a different kind of power for each one of you. What kind of power does she hold over Dante and D?”

The Fae tried to mask the smirk, narrowing his eyes on me instead. Then became pensive, trying to find a way around my question.

“That is one of the things you swore not to talk about, isn't it?”

“A vow of magic,” he explained, saying there was more than just his word keeping him from talking about it. “I can

tell you this,” he answered instead. “She found each one of us in a moment of our lives when needed hope the most. Like me, they feel like they owe everything to her, so they will never betray her. She brought us all together, dearie. Brought us together for *you*.”

Leaning in, he kissed my temple like he had done before, making emotion reach my throat. The kind of love emanating from the Fae as he looked at me shouldn't be there, but it was so honest and powerful that it not only humbled me... it hurt me. It was the way I'd wished so many times my uncle would look at me.

“Why would she do that?” I whispered, holding back the pain.

“She worries about you.”

“Why?”

“She can see people's futures, and she saw yours.”

“But why would she help *me*? Anastasia has never even met me.”

Facing me fully on the bench, he cupped my cheek caringly. “You are important to a lot of people, Natasha. More than you know.”

“Including D and Dante?”

“*Especially* to D and Dante... Whatever you heard them say to the Viscountess, I can assure you there was no ill intent. I know you are confused right now and mistrustful, but even if it may be hard to believe, their conversation was only a wellness check. They were letting her know about what happened to you, but that you were doing well now. Nothing more, nothing less.”

It was probably the wrong thing to do, but everything inside me wanted to believe him. My wolf, though hurt as I was, trusted Bjørn completely. Hope slowly returned to my heart, the ache waning. “I think Dante said he loved me while I was sleeping,” I confessed. “It wasn't really in those words but—?”

“It’s true... We’ve all loved you in one way or another before you even met us. Whatever happens, whatever doubts may cloud your mind or your heart while you await the truth, believe this above everything else. We will never hurt you or turn against you, Natasha. We would readily give our lives for you before—”

Blood abruptly drained from his face, his hand falling from my cheek as his eyes widened in horror.

“What happened?” I stood after him, heart racing when I saw his form begin to tremble in and out in distress.

“Isis...”

The single word echoed as he *blinked*, but I caught his arm before he could disappear.

His power jerked me into a swirling tunnel of energy with him. One moment *Central Park* was there, and then there was nothing but energy. My body no longer existed, yet my mind was alert and present. It felt as though I had disintegrated into a million particles now swirling through the vast space of nothingness.

Feeling returned to me suddenly as my form restructured, and the ground met way too fast. Sounds, smell, and sight all crashed into me in an instant, my hands and knees hitting the damped earth. The roaring sound of the rushing river encompassed everything while everything around me spun.

“Natasha! Are you okay?” Bjørn’s distressed voice muffled in my ears when he helped me stand.

I nodded, taking deep, steady breaths.

“*Never* do that again,” he scolded. “You could have been lost in the universe’s *élan*.”

“I’m sorry, but you said Isis... What did you expect me to do?” I grunted, fighting the urge to puke my guts out all over the snow-covered grass.

As the ringing in my head cleared, the river sounds became more powerful, and the Hunters’ fierce growling and barking immediately reached me. “The *Crystal Glow Mountains!*” I

gasped, looking beyond the Fae. We were back in Colorado, but this wasn't the top of our mountain, it was human territory, all the way down at the national park.

"Isis is around here. We have to find her before they do!" he urged, the growling getting closer and closer.

We frantically glanced all around us, Bjørn focused on her energy while I vigilantly surveyed the edge of the forest.

She was there, strewn half in the river, half above as she tried to hold the low branches that punctured the waters with one arm. She was visibly weak, the stream way stronger than her.

"There!" I screamed.

"Bjørn!" she rasped at the same time, seeing us, but the river surged and dragged her down the hill, stopping her from successfully climbing out or letting him get to her.

He *blinked* into the river after her anyway. Unfortunately, the rushing energy was too frantic for him to conquer. Over and over, he tried to get to her in the water, but each time, he appeared far behind her or too ahead of her.

"Isis!" I yelled, the horrifying sight pushing me into motion. I ran after them along the riverbend, disturbed at the realization that all this time Isis had been here.

Why hadn't her energy reached the Fae's senses until now?

When the growls behind me became ravenous and a howl pierced the sky, I knew the Hunters had scented me. Glancing behind me as I ran, Boden, Lanzo, and Hendrix's wolves burst from the trees. Thanks to the Goddess, it was just the three of them hunting for Isis, but now they were calling to the others to let them know I was here.

Sensing my dire need, my wolf took over my legs, lending me her mystical speed. Somehow, I ran faster than the river, well past Bjørn and Isis, leaving the Hunters behind until they disappeared from view. I knew he and Isis would be safe from the others while they were in the wild currents, no wolf would ever dare go inside and be taken by the river.

My desperate gaze spotted a campground of humans who were celebrating something in the clearing ahead of me.

“Please help us!” I shouted, reaching them. “My friend fell in the water, please!”

Thankfully, my cries didn’t go unanswered. Urgency entered their expressions when they looked at the river, and we caught the moment Bjørn finally grabbed Isis, but they were still being dragged by the force of water.

Three of the men shed their coats and ran past the signs that warned them of the dangerous current, jumping in it together. They held on to each other to brave the waters and spread their arms, catching my friends when they bumped into them. Together, Bjørn and the three men anchored themselves, staying in place.

Heart slamming against my chest, I watched a few women run past me, throwing a rope at the men so they could tie it around themselves. Slowly, the other humans pulled at the rope, helping get everyone close to the edge.

We pulled Isis to the ground, and I fell to my knees beside her, just as the Hunters’ growling and barking pierced the air, they’d finally reached us.

“Oh my God, they are gigantic!” a woman gasped, but a couple of people rushed forward, pointing rifles at the seemingly rabid wolves. The humans were more prepared for the mountain than I anticipated.

“Not today, palls,” the man called out with a cigar in his mouth, firing a warning shot over Boden, Lanzo, and Hendrix’s heads. The sound reverberated in the forest, alerting the upcoming Hunters to stay away.

Boden and the others glanced at each other, but the woman with the rifle was as gutsy as her mate. She fired two more shots. “We didn’t come to hunt today. Don’t tempt me!”

Salivating from the desire to capture me and take me back to their Alpha, Lanzo stepped forward, growling at me.

“I told you not to tempt me!” the woman shouted, like they weren’t unnaturally huge wolves she was facing. She shot at

his paw, but the shot didn't have the effect she expected.

Ignoring the pain, Lanzo sprung toward us with the others.

"They are going to attack the humans!" I gasped, shocked by their audacity.

The couple fired more shots, but it didn't stop the giant wolves, their self-healing taking care of the wounds as they advanced.

"Get back!" I frantically gestured to the couple, rushing to their side to try to protect them, but before I could do anything, the Fae *blinked* between the running wolves and us, a hiss escaping him.

The hiss was unlike anything I'd heard Vanessa or D utter as Vampires, its sound so powerful that it echoed through the trees, forcing the entire mountain into silence. Even the wild river seemed to still in response. Bjørn's back was to me while he squared up to them, but black twisted claws elongated from his fingers, gleaming a silver hue against the sunlight.

His hands were the only part I could see of him, but something told me he was no longer *the Fae*.

Hendrix, Boden, and Lanzo's wolves halted in their tracks at the sight of Bjørn like that, pieces of snow, earth, and grass splattering every which way as their claws dug into the ground to stop their run. Fear like I had never seen engulfed their eyes, and as Bjørn took a step toward them, they whipped around, hightailing it out of there.

Howls of urgency left them once they disappeared into the forest, surely warning the others of the startling danger.

Heart thundering in my ears, I watched Bjørn straighten once again as the claws vanished into his fingers. He took a couple of calming breaths that expanded and relaxed his chest before finally turning. When his eyes connected with mine, they were filled with concern, but they were still the warm amber hue I knew.

Part of me wanted to ask what had just happened to him, but the other part knew all too well...

“Are you alright?” he asked me, and I immediately nodded, remembering the other humans were behind me too.

“Are you okay?” I asked them in return, but they just looked at us, shocked, and confused about what they had just witnessed.

Shit. We didn’t have time for this.

Thankfully, not everyone here had seen the spectacle. The other half of the group was fully invested in Isis. When I returned to her side, I found her unconscious, a long coat draped over her naked body, while one of the men was hitting her chest and blowing air into her mouth.

“What are you doing?!” I demanded.

“It’s CPR. They are trying to save her life,” Bjørn answered, his gaze saying we needed to get Isis out of here because nothing they did could help her now.

“What happened to her?” one of the girls who helped pull them out asked, but I couldn’t answer. I didn’t know what to say.

“Our camp was attacked by the wolves up the mountain,” the Fae lied instead. “We tried running away but one got to her and she fell in the river. The wolf bite ripped her dress as she tried to escape. I jumped in after her, but I wasn’t able to get to her until you helped us. Thank you.”

Agony caught in my throat as I looked at her. Her once shimmery tanned skin was almost an ashy grey, wrinkly, and dull. Her beautiful thick hair was plastered to her head, and her lips had grown bluish in hue. She looked nothing like the Isis I remembered, my Isis.

*The wolf bite...*

Bjørn’s words sharpened my attention on her body, the shredded skin of her right arm jumping at me. Dismay clawed at my insides. Ryker knew the only weakness he could exploit to defend himself was Isis’ disabled arm, and he had torn through it viciously. Still, she’d bested him, but she had been in the river for so long that she wasn’t even bleeding anymore.



A cough suddenly gripped her, water spilling out of her mouth as she responded to the guy's treatment.

"We are here for you, Isis," I assured her, holding her hand in mine. "You are safe now, we are here."

"I'm calling for help," the man who performed CPR assured, turning to pull out a radio from a backpack.

"We truly appreciate that, but first, everyone look at me," the Fae told them, and they all stopped what they were doing to glance at him.

It was so weird.

When my eyes went to him too, I found black veins crawling up his face, his irises turning red.

"Look at Isis," he ordered without pulling his attention from them, and I lowered my head, pulse racing. "You never saw us here," he told the humans. "You were camping and three of your friends got rowdy while playing. They fell in the river, but you helped get them out safely. Nothing else happened. There was no woman drowning. There were no giant wolves. You never saw us here."

"There was no woman drowning. There were no giant wolves. We never saw you here," the humans replied in unison, seeming entranced by his words.

One of Bjørn's hands held onto me, while the other gripped Isis's arm, and the pull into the tunnel of energy came again, taking us all with it.

This time, however, my form remained the same as flashing energy zoomed past us. There was no disintegrating into a million particles, no darkness, no nothingness. I could still see Isis and the Fae, his features twisted by anguish as he regarded her frail state.

He seemed in as much agony as I was for her.

A second later our surroundings materialized, the living room of Dante's penthouse filling up the space until we were kneeling on the floor with Isis laid between us. The coat still covered her body.

“Isis!” Vanessa rushed toward us, kneeling next to me.

“What happened to her?” D asked from behind us, I assumed with Dante by his side.

“She stayed in the water,” I whispered, the realization slashing at my heart while tears caught in my throat. “The Hunters were on her tail since she bested Ryker. It was the only way she could stay safe. The only place they wouldn’t go in for her.” My blurring eyes lifted to Bjørn. “That’s why you couldn’t feel her. She was masked by the river’s energy surges until today. The current took her away from them enough that she came out for you to find her.”

The muscles of Bjørn’s jaw jerked violently, telling me he wanted to rip them all one by one for not letting him feel her sooner.

“This is my fault, she attacked Ryker to protect—” A sob swallowed my words, forcing me to cover my mouth as the pain finally overwhelmed me. Seeing Isis like this, half dead because of me was something from which I would never recover. “If she dies, I—”

“It is *not* your fault, and Isis is *not* going to die,” Dante vowed next to me, eyes swirling with darkness. “I’m not going to let her.”

“Come with me,” Vanessa urged, trying to pull me away, but my head shook adamantly.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“You have to.” D’s voice was soft as he placed a hand on my shoulder.

I recoiled from his touch.

“You have to,” Bjørn echoed. “You need to let us heal her.”

Glancing at him, I saw the fierceness in his expression that said he would save her life even if that was the last thing he did.

Realizing I was in their way, I immediately stood but stayed close. “I’m not leaving her side again.”

“You don’t have to,” Vanessa assured, guiding me to the sofa right next to them. She sat with me, holding me to her side while pain and fear burned through me. “We’ll just be right here.”

D and Dante took our places straightaway, D kneeling next to her head while Dante gently grabbed her injured arm. Both of the Fae’s hands rested over Isis’ heart.

“I’m sorry, Natasha. You won’t like what I have to do, but I *have* to do it.” With the words, D lifted his own wrist to his mouth and bit it, his fangs lowering enough to pierce his skin.

My entire body tensed when I saw him open Isis’s mouth and press his bleeding wrist over it, the blood dripping onto her tongue. I tried to contain the shock coursing through me at the sight, but the hurt in his eyes said I wasn’t exactly successful. He ignored me, continuing to feed her his blood.

Dante’s darkness wrapped around Isis’ arm as he began to heal it, and shimmery, burnt orange waves of energy flowed from Bjørn’s palms and into her chest.

“Vampire blood has regenerative capabilities, remember?” Vanessa asked, reminding me of our conversation at the diner, and pulling my gaze from the heartbreaking scene. “I used mine to heal Debbie’s granddaughter from a disease that was making her body attack itself. It was killing her slowly.”

I swallowed, focusing on her. “That’s how she knows you are a Vampire.”

“It is.” A gentle smile curved her lips, declaring she valued being able to save the girl’s life. “My brother’s is like that, but he’s...” She paused when his gaze bored into hers. “He’s *special*,” she said instead, causing him to shake his head even as he rolled his eyes. “So, his blood is far more powerful than mine. There, that’s all I said!” She made a face at him, then glanced back at me. “That is what Isis needs right now, Tasha. She needs him.”

Taking a calming breath, I nodded, forcing myself to accept that although all of this was strange for me, I was witnessing them save Isis’s life.

Nothing else mattered right now but her.

# 18

Silence swayed between us like a sullen lullaby while I watched the Fae, the Dark Witch, and the Vampire heal the woman who'd been like a mother to me all these years. The one who had traded her life for mine.

Vanessa's hand squeezed mine, bringing me out of my head, and she gestured toward her brother.

When my gaze fell on D's wrist, I noticed that Isis' lips had closed around it, and she was drinking from him of her own will. My gaze flew to her face, finding her eyes still closed, but as I continued to observe her, I also realized Dante had pretty much healed the wounds of her arm by now. Bjørn's magic still flowed into her chest, her skin regaining the stunningly tanned hue she possessed, and relief coursed through me, implacable.

Whatever they were doing for her, together, was working.

I doubted I would ever be able to express how grateful I was to them. Fresh tears rushed to my eyes, but I swallowed them trying not to make a fool of myself by crying in front of everyone again.

"Bjørn is sharing his life energy with her," Vanessa explained in a hushed tone when she saw me focused on his hands. "He's replenishing the life she lost."

"Is that dangerous for him?" I whispered, spotting the beads of sweat gathering on his forehead and his slightly strained expression.

“It can be... for any of them. It takes great effort and ability to give what is needed to save her, but not so much that it harms them instead.”

As she spoke, I noticed the traces of pain carving Dante’s features, dark circles growing under his eyes. It was only then that I remembered he’d fed Vanessa his blood to heal her, and then spent three days replenishing my wolf and me from everything we endured. Now he was exerting himself by healing Isis when he hadn’t even gotten to rest.

Concern for him immediately captured my being.

“Dante,” I called, seeing his eyes dim as they lifted to me. “Maybe you should—”

He collapsed against the floor before I could ask him to stop. He’d given Isis everything he had.

“Dante!” I yelled, rushing to his side as the others stopped.

Trying to wake him up, my hands gently slapped his face, while an anguish stronger than anything I had ever felt sliced through my being. The possibility of losing him destroyed me. I couldn’t lose him, not now that I’d finally found my true mate.

My wolf howled in pain inside me, crying for him.

Bands of shadows suddenly surged from every recess and corner, the others immediately moving out of their way, but I remained by Dante’s side—knowing that his darkness, like him, was part of me. The shadows curled around me on their way to him, before swirling over his form and engulfing him... The next second, he was gone.

They had taken him from me.

“No!” I gasped, fearing the worst.

D’s hand took mine, his thumb rubbing my palm to soothe me. “He’s going to be fine, Natasha. The *Twilight* has him now.”

“He really will be,” Vanessa assured. “She would never let anything happen to him.”

Blinking, I glanced between them. “Anastasia?” I asked confused. “I mean, the Viscountess?” I corrected when their reproaching gazes went to the Fae.

Bjørn just shrugged, his focus remaining on Isis.

“No. His Goddess, Hecate. Of all the *Lords of Twilight*, Dante is her greatest creation. That’s why he’s *Mr. Cocky*.” Vanessa snorted. “She’ll never let anything happen to him.”

“Whenever he overexerts himself, the darkness takes him,” D explained. “The Goddess knows his soul too well, so you could say that she built a safeguard into his power. It’s also why he’s so reckless with it.”

“He knows the *Twilight* always has his back.” Vanessa rubbed my arm to comfort me.

Sighing, I nodded, but although I understood, it had been scary as hell seeing him disappear like that.

“We must let her rest now,” Bjørn suggested, removing his hands from her chest, and D let go of me, gently lifting his wrist from Isis’ mouth at the same time.

Although she was unconscious, she seemed almost like herself when I glanced at her. Unfortunately, there were still signs of weakness and exhaustion in her. She’d been through too much.

“I’ll take her to her room.” The Fae announced a moment before he *blinked* with her.

I stood right after. “Which room?”

“Give them some time. I’ll take you to the room later,” Vanessa offered. “They both need rest.”

My wolf’s growl made it out of me, loudly, causing her eyes to widen. I knew she was used to Wolf Shifters; however, I didn’t think she understood how much her statement upset me.

“I know you mean well, Vane, and you’ve always tried to help, but you guys already forced me to leave her side once. I’m not letting you again.” My gaze shifted to D’s. “Where is Isis’ room?”

A troubled sigh left him, but he nodded. “This way.”

When we walked past Dante’s room, I stopped briefly and opened the door, half expecting him to be there, surrounded by his darkness.

“He’s with the *Twilight*,” D reminded me, so I began following him again.

Except, I didn’t understand what that meant. Was he deep in the darkness somewhere, in a void, or up in the endless night of the cosmos, floating amid stars like the ones in his tattoo?

Our steps took us to the other side of the apartment, and the only room found there. Offering me a small nod, D left me there, in front of the wooden door. I lifted a hand to knock, suddenly feeling like maybe I shouldn’t. Maybe they were right, and I should let her rest.

“You are welcome to come in, Natasha,” Bjørn’s voice reached me from the other side, and I frowned, turning the knob slowly.

The first thing that caught my attention once I stepped inside, was how soothing and nature-inspired the space was, filled with golds, creams, and soft warm tones. It felt like Isis, the realization bringing a small smile to my lips. The second thing that caught my attention when I focused on the bed, was the way the Fae lay beside her. She was safely under the covers now, his body protectively curling around her while he lay over them.

However, it was the way his fingers tenderly caressed Isis’ weak arm while he watched her sleep that told me Bjørn hadn’t searched so fervently just for me, or even just for her, he’d also done it for himself.

Sitting on the other side of them, I placed a careful hand on her cheek. “You love her, don’t you?”

A tiny chuckle left him, like “loving her” was an understatement. “Don’t tell her that. The first warning she ever gave me was not to fall in love with her... And I bloody hate



when people tell me what to do.” He winked at me like he was letting me in on the secret.

My eyes watered even as I smiled. “I *should* leave you with her—”

“No,” he insisted, reaching for my hand before I could stand. “She’d want you here too. Isis has given a lot to keep you safe. The person she loves the most should be here when she wakes up.”

“I think the person she loves the most is you,” I countered, emotion rushing to my throat.

“There is *no one* as important to her as you are,” Bjørn guaranteed. “But when it comes to you, dearie, I gladly take second place.”

A tear escaped me with his words, but he lovingly wiped it away, guiding me to lie down on the bed with them. So, I did. My head rested on the pillow next to Isis. The Fae and I smiled at each other, our love for her connecting us deeper than anything else could.

No wonder she’d never wanted to mate with anyone in the pack... she’d already found her mate in him.

When my eyes opened again, I realized we’d both fallen asleep with Isis, and night had already taken over the city on the other side of the balcony doors. Except, Isis was no longer on the bed.

“Isis?” I called, sitting up and low-key hyperventilating, only to find her exiting the walk-in closet in a long, silk, sleeping gown and robe now covering her body.

Before she could answer, I rushed to her side, my arms trapping her in a bear hug.

A few chuckles escaped her as she embraced me too. “My sweet baby girl,” she whispered, kissing my cheek. “I’m so glad they saved you and got you out of there. Ouch!”

“Sorry.” I began to pull away, but she hugged me again. “I’m not made of glass, I’m just still a little sore, that’s all.”

“They didn’t save me, you did,” I corrected, glancing into her still dull brown eyes. It hurt not to see the spark they’d always carried.

“Oh, believe you me. It was a group effort.” She humorlessly chuckled, before pain clouded her expression. “I’m so sorry I wasn’t here for you, Tasha. I’m sorry that things transpired the way they did. It was never supposed to happen this way. I wanted to—”

“I don’t care.” Fresh pain tugged at my heart. She had almost died to save me, and here she was, apologizing. “You have nothing to be sorry for. I just care that you are safe and by my side again. I can’t do any of this without you.”

“Oh, baby.” She squeezed me again, probably a bit harder than she should. “Ouch.” We chuckled at that and pulled away to look at each other. “What have they told you so far?”

“Not much.” I snorted, making her lips twitch. “Vane shared some of her story with me, and so did Dante, and Bjørn. But I don’t know the truth of why I’m even here, how you know them all, or why they care about me in the first place. They guard their secrets well.”

“It’s not their secrets they guard.” She exhaled, taking a strand of my hair, and caressing it. “They are just respecting my wishes. I wanted to be the one to tell you the truth. I wanted it to come from—” She doubled over, as a moan of pain ripped from deep inside her. Isis’ touch left me, and she gripped her side.

“You need more rest, lay down.”

“But there’s so much I must—”

“You can tell me tomorrow morning. Right now, you are more important. You need to rest.” Her lips pursed tightly, and I knew she wasn’t happy with me cutting her off. She had raised me better than that.

“I’m sorry...”

All this time I’d thought about asking her if she trusted them, but it was a moot point by now. She’d endured being in the river knowing without a shadow of a doubt that Bjørn

would get to her the second he felt her. And he had. She trusted that whatever condition she was in, Dante and D would use their abilities to heal her. And they had.

Isis trusted them with her life *and* mine... and I realized then that so did I. When I chose to protect Debbie instead of myself, I knew Dante would heal me. The truth was, I already trusted them all with my life too.

Of course, I was still pissed at D and Dante for talking about me behind my back with the freaking Viscountess.

Whatever.

“Do you trust Anastasia? Is she a *good* Vampire?”

Isis’ eyes widened with my words, and she turned around to glare at the sleeping Fae, grunting. “Men, I swear sometimes I wonder why the Goddess created them.”

Chuckling, I guessed he was the only person who used that name for the Viscountess.

Grabbing something from the nightstand she threw it at him, the hair clip hitting him square in the chest.

He jumped awake from the scare, *blinking* out of the room as a reflex then *blinking* back in, but in the air, crashing on his ass against the floor.

“Yes. Of course, she is a... a *good* Vampire,” Isis assured, seeming confused by my chosen terminology. “You can trust her blindly.”

“Isis! Are you okay?” the Fae asked, standing while rubbing his ass.

“Well, I don’t know, Bjørn. What are you doing sleeping? Aren’t you supposed to be watching me to make sure I awake?”

He *blinked* to her side right away, holding her from behind and kissing her cheek. “I love it when you treat me badly. I guess you are perfectly fine now.”

Isis chuckled, winking at me. “Tell me, why would Natasha know the name *Anastasia*?”

“She tortured me for it.”

Shaking her head, Isis sighed, looking at me like there was nothing she could do about him now. “Never believe the first thing a Fae tells you.”

“Yeah, he warned me about that.”

Glancing sideways at him, she narrowed her eyes. “Try again.”

“She is secretly an evil sorcerer, and I was hopeless but to comply with her demands.”

Laughter escaped me at that one, and the Fae winked at me just as Isis doubled over again, grabbing her side.

“Okay, enough fun. You are still not fully healed because we had to stop,” Bjørn admitted. “You need to rest to recover.”

Concern for the others painted her expression. “What? Why did they stop?”

“Something happened here too,” I began, not wanting to go into details because she would freak the hell out and then want to wolf up and go back to the mountain. “Long story short, the guys are exhausted, and Dante collapsed while healing you, so the darkness took him.”

“We’ll tell you everything tomorrow after you wake up refreshed. I promise, Luv,” Bjørn offered.

Her expression said Isis wanted to do everything but that, still, she nodded, leaning in to kiss my cheek before letting her mate get her back to bed. Taking away her robe, he pulled the covers over her and handed her a healing potion from the nightstand’s drawer—helping her drink it before he kissed her.

The way his lips closed over hers so filled with love and passion, yet so gentle, reminded me of the way that Dante kissed me last night, and my heart constricted.

I was going to smack him for that as soon as he reappeared.

Based on my experience with those potions, I knew that Isis would sleep like the dead tonight—thanks to Dante’s

magic—so I stepped out of the room silently, closing the door to give them time alone.

A smell I'd never had the chance of scenting before invaded my nostrils, its deliciousness awakening my stomach. I kind of growled. I hated being hungry when there were far more important things happening.

Helpless but to follow the scent, I walked back toward the kitchen to find Vanessa sitting at the table with a paper bag and a bunch of containers scattered around it. The seat next to her seemed to have been used already, a half-filled glass and a plate with a few leftovers still there.

“My brother already went back to his room. Do you want Chinese food? I was starving so I ordered some... It's his favorite.”

“Yes, please.” I walked to the table, seeing her remove the paper plate and glass I used and place new ones there for me.

“Have you ever had Chinese?” She smiled when I shook my head. “Do you want to try? These are the ones I like the most. This one is special fried rice, with a bunch of yummy things inside, sweet, and sour chicken, and of course, my absolute favorite, pork egg rolls.”

Grabbing the ones she mentioned, I served myself a portion each, taking the first bite of the special rice. “Holy crap. This is delicious!”

Chuckling, she wiggled her eyebrows. “I know, right? Try the fried chicken without the sauce first. Then dip it here.”

“Goddess, I am not sure if this is actually this freaking good or I'm just starving.”

“Both.”

We chuckled at that. “It's amazing, thanks for sharing, Vane.”

“Of course, Tasha.”

After taking a sip of the effervescent drink she called soda, I sighed and glanced at her, embarrassed. “I'm sorry for

growling at you before. It wasn't me, it was my wolf, but still. I shouldn't have—”

“Oh, that's okay,” she assured, waving a dismissing hand at me before biting into an eggroll. “I'm used to wolf growls. Sometimes Isis does that when she means business, but most of the time they come from Hannes—*Mr. Temperamental*. They are like a second language to him...” She snorted at that. “That's normal for Wolf Shifters, I just wasn't expecting them from you, so it surprised me. That's all.”

“Still, I'm sorry. I wasn't mad at you, I was just—”

“Worried about Isis.” She nodded, gripping my hand on the table. “Yeah, we all are.”

“She's doing better,” I offered. “She woke up, changed into her pj's and we talked a little bit. She is sleeping again after she took one of Dante's potions.”

“I'm so glad to hear that.” Genuine care shone in her eyes. “Do you feel better about us now that she is here?”

I felt bad she even had to ask the question. Given how complicated our relationship had been since I met them, it was expected. “Yes, I do.”

Shadows of guilt suddenly fell over her light expression, and she lowered her gaze from mine, seeming ashamed. “I'm sorry I had to drink from Dante after the Hunters attacked. Believe me, it was the last thing I ever wanted to do—”

“You don't have to apologize,” I promised, squeezing her hand too, although learning he'd done that to help her had been so strange at first. “You were incredibly injured by Barret and Zain during your fight... Dante did what he had to do to help you and I'm grateful you are well now.”

Relief washed over her body, relaxing her, and she rested against the chair, smiling at me as we continued to eat in silence.

After we were both satisfied by the delicious Chinese food, which I would surely eat every day for the rest of my life, Vanessa and I made our way to our rooms, saying goodnight.

My steps slowed as I walked past D's door, the familiar energy inside once again calling to me as it had before the attack. Sensing his sister's curious gaze on me, I forced myself to keep going, entering my room instead—not before she quietly chuckled.

Sure enough, the unhappy rustling of my wolf filled my chest, and I grunted.

*“What the hell do you want from me? We are with Dante now, get with the program!”* I threw my hands in the air, hoping to make a point, but she wouldn't have it.

Plopping my ass on my bed, I stared at the bookcases across from me for a while, refusing to give in to my she-wolf's demands. Why did she want D, anyway? Dante was more than delicious, and he had satisfied every desire I didn't even know I had—correction—he had awakened every desire I didn't know existed in me, and now I needed him to return so he could satisfy them all over again.

My cheeks flushed with the memory of how he felt inside me, and a whimper made its way up my throat, my legs closing tightly in response. Still, the urge to enter D's room was there, growing in my wolf.

Standing, I went to the bookcase, picked up a book, and attempted to read. That was, until I realized it was upside down in my hands and I'd opened it in the middle. Book after book I picked up and tossed aside. This was the closest I'd ever get to being in a human library, one of my dreams, and I couldn't even make myself focus enough to see what the hell happened to King Arthur and Merlyn.

A frustrated sigh tightened my chest, and I glanced at the door, feeling my wolf impatiently rustle yet again.

“Fine. You win,” I mumbled under my breath, walking to the door.

Slowly opening it, I poked my head outside, glancing both ways to make sure there was no one there. Finding the hallway clear, I hurried my way to D's door, and my hand lifted to knock, but then dropped.

What the hell was I going to say to him anyway? *Hey, my wolf wants you? Never mind that I already mated with your friend, Dante.*

*“Don’t worry, I’m not jealous. Dante and I’d love to share...”*

His voice resounded in my mind and my wolf eagerly swooned inside me. Clearly, she loved his statement. Grunting, I folded my arms and pressed my back to the door.

This was a bad idea.

Unfortunately, it unceremoniously opened with the weight, sending me crashing on the floor *inside* his room.

*Shit!*



# 19

I jumped back to my feet and whirled around, but thankfully, no one had heard that. Pulse racing, I closed the door, remained inside, and peeked around the wall of the entryway just like I had this morning. The space immediately after had four chairs, a large desk, and a computer on top, yet it was empty. Walking in, I found it curious that his room was preceded by an office.

D's scent tried to filter into my nose, but it was diluted as everyone else's scent also floated around the space, telling me they usually gathered here.

A large picture on the wall caught my attention then. It was more like a painting of a couple, but it was nothing like the pictures humans took. Instead of appearing to look at the camera or the painter, the couple faced the other, their foreheads pressed together somberly while they held each other closely.

It was a beautiful piece where shadows and light played a big role, presumably on purpose, although it only let me see the hard edges and planes of their faces. I could tell their eyes were closed, and the lady's hand rested over the man's heart while both his hands curved around her lower back. Their clothes seem elegant and expensive, but what struck me most about it was the emotion the simple image conveyed.

I wasn't exactly sure what it was, yet my eyes glistened as I stared at it, stirring feelings inside me. Sorrow flowed freely from the image in waves, as though they'd suffered the kind of

pain that nothing could ever heal. For a moment, I wondered if they were D and Vanessa's family.

Forcing my eyes away from it, I glanced toward the archway that surely led to D's actual room and stopped by the double doors. Complete silence greeted me from the other side. A normal person would have assumed he was sleeping and left, right? Wrong.

Before I could stop myself, I turned the knob and glanced inside it. Immediately, the enticing aroma of pine, wild orchid, and smoked vetiver rushed into me, almost making my eyes roll back in pleasure. This was D's domain.

The room was dimly lit, revealing a wall with colorful street drawings like the ones I'd seen in the city—graffiti, I thought it was called. That was the only place with color though, the rest was filled with muted greys, whites, and blacks.

My feet moved without consent, taking me farther into the space, and I wondered where D had gone. A new picture rested over his night table, urging me to pick it up. It was much smaller than the one outside, and far more colorful. In it, a full family smiled at the camera, strings with multicolored beads wrapped around their necks while two women dressed in colorful feathers and shimmery sequins—both in their body and tall headpieces—stood at either side of them.

Younger versions of Vanessa and D were nestled between the couple, their arms wrapped around their father and mother who were honestly an older replica of them. Vanessa looked just like her mother, down to the curly brown hair with natural gold strokes, while D had the same strong jaw, penetrating, crystalline hazel eyes, and tall muscular body as his father.

Even the frame was colorful and filled with life. The bottom read, "*Rio de Janeiro Carnaval, 2014.*"

Once more, emotion filtered into my being, because as filled with joy and love as the picture was, something told me it was also filled with sorrow. The family looking back at me seemed so happy, that I was certain D and Vanessa would have never left if their parents were still alive.

I knew I wouldn't have.

Glancing back at the half-illuminated graffiti that covered the entire back wall, I realized it was a depiction of that Carnival, something he surely held close to his heart, just as he did the picture next to his bed.

When I placed it down, the sound of rushing water finally reached my awareness, and I spun to notice what I hadn't until now—the bathroom door was open, and D was in there. A normal person would have low-key begun to have anxiety and left the room before being caught, right?

Well, panic I did. Yet, it seemed I was a glutton for punishment because leave, I did not. Instead, I walked into the bathroom slowly, stopping by the door, my gaze immediately finding D in the shower across from me. The space was huge, just like my bathroom and Dante's, with two glass panels forming the shower stall by the corner and giving me a full view of him.

Both his hands rested above his head on the wall before him, bearing his weight as the water rushed down his body. The droplets rolled off his bowed head, along his neck, his strong back and shoulders, over his spine to the deliciously firm glutes facing me, and down his powerful thighs to the floor. I couldn't pull my eyes from it.

Fascinated, I pressed my back to the doorframe and just admired him. I'd seen men naked around me my entire life, but until Dante and now D, I realized I'd never really seen a true man at all.

Not like them. *Nothing* like them.

My wolf stretched lazily inside me, shamelessly happy as we watched him.

His head tilted toward his shoulder in the slightest way, and I held my breath, fearing he'd heard me. When he reached for the bottle on the wall shelf, I relaxed. He had no idea I was there.

The gel swirled onto his palm before he began lathering his body, forming bubbles everywhere. *Everywhere*. His large

hands roamed over his shoulders and lower back, his glutes, and thighs thoroughly—his muscles tensing and relaxing as he did, making my mouth dry.

After washing it all away, D turned to face me, his gaze holding mine as he squeezed more shower gel onto his palm. I stopped breathing, but there was no reproach in his eyes for me being there, no anger, no surprise even... He'd felt me here before I even realized it.

His gaze lowered as he began to lather his arms, and chest, then his abs, and lower... I knew now what a glorious sight a man's body was when hardened, and as I relaxed again, watching his hands roam his inner thighs and then grab himself, my wolf and I both wished we could see him hard too.

Unfortunately, bubbles popped up everywhere, blocking my view while he soaped up, but soon his hands lifted to his head, rubbing the shampoo over his hair as the water cleansed away the soap.

Entranced, I watched the rushing water caress his form on the way down, over the hard planes of his abs and hips, to the tempting length between his legs. Water dripped from it in a perfect stream, making me want to drink from him.

It took a few seconds to realize the water had stopped running from the shower, and I lifted my gaze to see D sliding the glass door open and stepping outside. His eyes once more bored into mine, and instead of grabbing a towel to dry himself, he walked up to me slowly, maddeningly so, like a wolf on the prowl—which was ironic since he was a...

"Vampire," I whispered, glancing up at him when he stopped a couple of feet away.

A troubling emotion fled through his eyes, but he nodded. "I am."

His voice was soft, not insulted, or ashamed, just factual.

A ragged breath filled my chest, and I realized that I was holding my breath with him so close. The crooked grin I knew as only his, returned, pulling only the right side of his full lips.

“You okay?” His voice made my attention leave his mouth and settle on his eyes, I nodded. “I don’t mind you being here,” D whispered like it was the most natural thing for me to watch him this way.

The statement set a part of me at ease. Not my wolf. She didn’t give a fuck whether he cared or not. She knew she belonged here, for some reason.

“Your wolf likes me, doesn’t she?” he asked softly, resting his hand on the frame behind me and leaning into me.

“Yes,” I breathed, watching the water from his hair drip onto his face.

He didn’t care one bit.

“But I don’t like you talking about me behind my back,” I whispered, trying to maintain some sanity.

Regret clouded his eyes, and he lifted his free hand to my cheek, stroking it soothingly. “I know. I’m sorry about that. We were just informing the Viscountess that you were safe after the *Shadow Born* found you here.”

“Because Anastasia worries about me?”

He nodded, though he seemed uncomfortable when I called her by her real name. “Did Bjørn tell you that?”

“Yes. Why does she want you to take me to her?”

“Because she worries about you,” he repeated my words, making me narrow my eyes at him. The sensual crooked grin captured his mouth yet again. “Because she doesn’t believe it’s safe for you here anymore. Not only for you but for any of us, including Isis now that she’s back.”

His thumb lowered from my cheek to my jaw, stroking my bottom lip and sending my wolf into a frenzy.

I blinked, preventing my eyes from fluttering close with the feeling. “Thank you for refusing to leave without her,” I admitted, making his caress stop.

I almost cursed myself.

“We *never* leave anyone behind, and Isis is one of us,” he pledged, his gaze intensifying with the weight of truth. “The only reason why we felt comfortable leaving the mountain to bring you here was because—”

“Bjørn would find her and bring her back in a second,” I finished for him, seeing him nod, relieved I understood.

“We would do anything for Isis.”

“I know...”

Pleased to see I was starting to trust them, he nodded and resumed his caress of my lower lip, his head tilting over me until his lips landed on my neck. D kissed the same spot Dante had claimed and my entire body reacted to it.

My wolf freaking moaned in his ear.

What the fuck?

A smile stretched his lips against my neck, and he kissed it again, and again, nibbling the tender spot and making my wolf’s heat awaken. My whole body trembled with need when his hand lowered from my jaw to my chest, nipples hardening as he briefly grazed my breasts on his way down. D gripped my waist instead, almost feeling the fight inside—between my wolf’s desire and mine.

He didn’t try anything else. He didn’t kiss my mouth or massaged my breasts, he didn’t even try to squeeze my ass, and considering I was basically splattered between the door frame and him, he had every chance to do it. Still, he didn’t even try. Kissing my neck one last time, D lifted his face, holding my gaze.

“Don’t worry. I know there’s turmoil between your mind and your heart when it comes to me. I’m not going to make you mine until you absolutely, desperately, and with every inch of your body crave for me to do so,” he vowed, stroking my jaw again. “Until both you *and* your wolf feel scorching desire engulf you with the need for me... Until you ask me to.”

I didn’t know about scorching flames, but wetness pooled between my legs, making my thighs press together tightly.

“I’m with Dante,” I weakly argued, breathless.

D’s mouth tilted with that enticing crooked grin of his, his dimple flaring to life on his chin with the gesture. “For now...”

Leaning in, he brushed his mouth against mine, before stealing a kiss, and I was hopeless but to let him. It was way too brief, and his lips seemed to tug on mine when he pulled away, almost wanting to take them with him.

“Just to help me hold on,” he whispered, reminding me of the soft, sweet, need-filled kiss we had shared at the mountain.

I had half a mind to complain, but my gaze followed the corded muscles of his neck as the water slid over them, washing over his tattoo. Eyes widening, I reached for his neck, and he tilted his head to the other side, knowing all too well what I wanted.

“No scars,” I whispered noticing the drawings were intact, and he smiled.

“No scars...” D confirmed, dropping his arm from the door frame behind me and extending it to give me full access.

Unlike Dante’s, D’s tattoo started on the neck, even extending around his left peck. My fingertips traced the vines that stretched down his body, curling and turning, interlacing with one another before starting to form a forest of beautifully full pine trees of different sizes. Leaves floated throughout, dancing together to the silent music of the mountain breeze. All under a growing bright sky, where the powerful sunrise was represented by a stunning sun symbol above it all.

It reminded me of the star bursting with light that also hovered on top of Dante’s cosmos.

It looked nothing like the forest I grew up in, so I knew it wasn’t the same mountain. Mystical fog also swayed along the drawings, in and out of the treetops gracing the sky, until the vines reconnected—forming a carefully ornate frame of floating leaves, curly vines, and magical mist.

A frame to adorn the presence of the large, gorgeous, and fierce white wolf in its center.

“That’s my wolf,” I whispered in shock, bringing his gaze back to my eyes.

“Do you recognize it?”

Sorrow coiled around my heart, but I still nodded. “Only by a feeling. I’ve never seen my wolf before, and now that the fire crystals are destroyed, I might never get to meet her.”

“Of course, you will,” he assured, leaning into me until our mouths were only a few inches away. His penetrating gaze said he would find a way, no matter what, and the conviction in them made my breath falter.

D pulled away, but my hands remained on him, unable to stop touching him. My touch continued to caress his body, relishing the way his pecs felt under my fingertips. I watched his eyes fall closed, and he grabbed the frame again, as though he needed to hold on not knowing what I might do to him.

Well, *I* wasn’t going to do anything. But my wolf liked the feel of his wet body under my hand, and right now, I wasn’t exactly sure I was the one in control of us. My fingertips followed the waterdrops sliding to his abs, tracing each square on my way down until the most glorious sight greeted me.

D had hardened with my attention, so much so that he was completely erect, his tip reaching over his belly button. My wolf whimpered at the sight, my stomach dipped, and the wetness between my legs intensified, leaving me drenched. My hands itched to touch him like I had done with Dante. To test how hard and soft he felt between my fingers as I stroked him, and the scorching feeling of his skin in my hold.

Swallowing, I glanced into his eyes while my fingertips inched down his abs little by little. D’s gaze was fully on me now, and he seemed to be barely breathing... My wolf wanted him to kiss me again, harder this time. To lift me onto the vanity behind us and rip off my clothes. It was all my wolf, not me though. She wanted him to part my legs open and slide into our drenched center just like Dante had.

He was a bit longer than Dante, and I wanted to feel his length inside me too.



She did. *My wolf* wanted to feel it.

Eyes widening, a gasp escaped my throat when his fangs descended over his full lower lip. The striking sight snapped me back to reality, and I instantly took my hand off his body. Startled, I pressed away from him, into the wall.

D cursed under his breath. “I’m sorry,” he hurriedly offered, before closing his mouth over the fangs.

I blinked up at him, taken aback by the sight. Was he craving my blood? Did D want to drink from me?

“It doesn’t mean what you think it means,” he assured, visibly pained by my reaction to him like this. He moved back to give me space, but the fangs were still peeking out of his mouth.

Disconcerted, I stepped through the doorway, away from him. My wolf’s heat still invaded my body, and my core, but my mind had very much broken the spell.

My wolf didn’t like that. Not a single bit. She growled deep within my chest, urging me to return to him.

*“Mine!”*

The word rang impossibly loud and clear, echoing through the recesses of my being. A spoken declaration from my wolf.

My eyes widened even more, all blood draining from my face. “Goddess!” I gasped, jumping back from the scare.

Had I just heard my wolf’s voice?!

“I’m so sorry, Natasha,” D urgently offered, thinking this had to do with him.

I mean, it did, but not in the way he thought. Although, a little in the way he thought too.

“Let me explain—”

“No.”

*“Mine!”* she growled again, and I stared into his pained eyes.

“I’m sorry.”

“No. It’s not...”

“Please, just let me—”

“No.”

Whirling around, I ran out of his room, bursting into mine.

I expected the space to be empty, but Dante sat on my bed, waiting for me in his silk sleeping pants. Relief slammed against my body in so many ways when I saw him, and I ran to him, hugging him.

“Well, hello to you too.” He smirked over my lips before kissing me, and his kiss was everything I needed.

Passionate. Hungry. Soft, and indulging. Reassuring. Safe.

“Are you okay?” I breathed once he let go of my mouth.

“I am, I promise.”

“I was so worried about you... When you disappeared like that—”

“I’m sorry I scared you, *Cuore mio*. I just had to help Isis, and I was already depleted.”

“I know,” I interjected, gripping his neck, and pulling him down for another kiss.

“Not that I’m complaining, but I didn’t quite expect this warm welcome from you. I thought you were pissed off at me.”

“I was.” I sighed, feeling a little more like myself. “I am.” I smacked his arm, hard, which made him smirk at me. “Don’t you ever talk about me behind my back again.”

His mouth opened to explain.

“Not even to Anastasia,” I scolded. “If she wants to know how I am, or what’s happened since I got here, or if you and I are together, she can ask me to my face.”

“Sir, yes, Sir!” he answered, touching two fingers to his temple.

“Stop it.”

Dante chuckled at that, but his gaze said he could see right through me. “What happened?”

“What do you mean, what happened?”

“Well, you came running into your room after leaving D’s and—”

“You knew I was in his room?” I asked, mortified. Did he just catch me cheating on him? *Shit!* Wait, I hadn’t cheated on him, had I? Crap, this was so confusing.

His eyebrow arched in a way that said nothing happened in his penthouse without him knowing about it. “Of course, I knew. The *Twilight* told me. Now, why don’t you calm down, and tell me what happened?”

The darkness told him?!

*Stupid Twilight ratting me out.*

“I’m so sorry, Dante, I...” My eyes fell from his in shame, but laughter escaped him in response.

He actually laughed at me.

“Why the hell are you laughing?” I demanded only for him to crack up even more.

“It’s your face,” he chuckled, pulling me down to his lap as he sat on the bed. “There is nothing for you to feel guilty about. I don’t care that you were in his room, alone, with him.”

My cheeks flushed at the way he said it, but he truly seemed not to care. “But I was in his bathroom.”

His eyebrow arched with the news, as though the *Twilight* hadn’t exactly told him that part.

“It was an accident,” I blurted, wide-eyed.

“So, how exactly does one walk past the entry, into his office, and across his room to his bathroom by accident?” he asked, mouth twitching in amusement.

“I swear to the Goddess, Dante!”

Laughter burst from him, and I smacked his arm again. “Natasha, I *want you* to hit me. That’s not a punishment. How haven’t you realized that by now?”

I chuckled when he pulled us both to lay down on the bed, tugging me against his body. My face rested on his bare chest, fully enjoying his warmth against my cheek, and my body naturally curled around him.

“You really aren’t mad?”

“No, *Cuore mio*. But I want you to tell me what happened because something scared you, and I need to know what it was.”

His finger curled under my chin, gently lifting my head so I would look at him. I considered telling him about my wolf, but I wasn’t sure how he would feel about her claiming D after I’d mated with him already.

“You can tell me anything,” he promised. “I’m always going to understand.”

His eyes shone with the entire cosmos inside them, but more than that, they shone with sincerity, and I truly felt like I could tell him the truth. So, I did. Taking a deep breath, I told him everything. Even if it could cost me him.

# 20

DANTE

Natasha's cheeks grew pink as we lay on the bed, with that beautiful flush they always got when she was embarrassed or aroused. In this case, it was both, the gesture telling me everything she still didn't dare to say as she recalled her encounter with D in his bathroom.

Pensive, I glanced down at her while my fingers slowly traced the sensitive curve of her neck, helping her relax. "Why did you go into D's room?"

"Because my wolf wanted me to," she breathed. "She wanted us to see him."

Relief coursed through me. It meant the world to me that Natasha trusted me enough to admit that. From what she knew, she was only meant to mate with one person... She had no idea she was different. Not yet... but soon.

"Dante..." she suddenly called, uncertainty staining my name on her lips.

I did not like that.

"What is it?"

"I need you to tell me the truth."

A burdened breath tightened my chest because I knew what that meant, and I knew Isis hadn't been able to speak to her yet due to her condition, but I was done keeping things from her. "Whatever you want to know, just ask."

She bit her lower lip, as though it was difficult for her, and she might not want the answer. “Why does D have me on his skin too? Why does his arm have the white wolf tattoo?”

Fine, maybe I didn’t know. That was certainly not what I’d expected her to ask.

Glancing into her trusting eyes, I lifted my touch to her jaw, stroking it. “Because you are his too, Natasha. And Hannes’...”

A small gasp left her lips, eyes churning with bewilderment, but also recognition. Like a huge mystery had finally been revealed, and I surmised it had to do with her wolf’s needs. “Hannes has my wolf on his arm too?”

“Yes,” I smiled at her, feeling relieved to finally be able to tell her that. We desperately needed her to understand, so we could all be together once and for all. “We are all yours, *Cuore mio*.”

Her teeth began playing with her bottom lip again as she processed that, understanding seeming to illuminate her silverish-blue eyes.

I pressed my mouth to hers, stopping the habit that was driving me crazy. “But that is not what scared you...” I gathered once I pulled back again. “Won’t you tell me what really happened?”

“His fangs came out,” she whispered, and I could almost see the fear the sight might have caused her. Especially since she was beginning to unlearn all the bullshit she was taught about Vampires.

“It doesn’t mean what you think,” I assured, my touch leaving her jaw. “He didn’t want to drink from you. I mean, he did, but not in the way you think.”

Worry clouded her eyes, and she sat upright.

Great, now I was cock-blocking myself.

Sighing, I sat up with her, reaching for her hand to maintain our contact. “Do you know how wolves bite each other when mating?”

Blinking, she looked at me, both recognition and confusion pushing away her worry. “Yeah.”

“Well, it is very similar for him. Wolves bite each other until they taste blood to claim their mate. Vampires do too, drinking a bit from their partner to mate. It is not a ‘blood-thirsty’ thing, it’s a ‘he wants you to be his’ thing. He was naked in front of the woman he wants more than anything, and you were touching him intimately. He kissed you. D was ready to mate with you, that’s why his fangs appeared.”

“Oh,” she whispered, clarity inundating her eyes. “But I’m not a Vampire.”

“You are not a Witch either, but you mated with me,” I reminded. “Our world is different than the one you grew up in, Natasha. Here, you don’t have to only choose me, you can have us all... If you want,” I added when her eyes widened, the rosy hue on her cheeks becoming a full strawberry red.

The way her body responded to the idea said she wanted us all, her wolf desired us too, but she was having trouble fully conceptualizing that and admitting it to herself. That wasn’t a problem. D, Hannes, and I had waited for five years since learning she was ours. Hell, I’d waited even longer than that, since losing Corelia. Nevertheless, we would help her truly feel each of us, who we were to her, and understand what it meant to be mated with all of us at once.

“My wolf claimed D...” she whispered so low that I almost didn’t hear her.

“What do you mean she claimed him?”

“I heard her voice inside me. She said ‘*Mine*’.”

A true smile stretched my lips. “Did she, really?”

Natasha nodded, though she also scowled at me, not liking my smile.

“Can you tell her to claim me too, please? Because, sure, D’s dick is longer, but my head is bigger, and she already knows what magic I can do with it. Sooo...”

Her hand slammed against my arm. “I’m serious, Dante!”

“Me too! I take my penis very seriously, thank you very much.” My lips twitched, but I knew this was important for her. “I’m sorry. You know I can’t help myself.” Turning our bodies so we lay on the center of the bed, I pulled her close and kissed her neck. “Is that what scared you the most?”

Giving into my touch, she nodded, resting her head on my shoulder as my fingertips caressed her back.

“She’s never spoken to me before,” she confessed. “I mean. I’ve always felt her emotions. I can decipher what she wants—like when she dragged me into D’s room—but I-I’ve never heard her speak. I didn’t even know that was possible.”

Natasha brought up a good point. “I’ll ask Hannes about it. He’s the Wolf Shifter Prince, if anyone knows if that’s possible, it’s him.”

“Thank you.”

“Of course... It should be exciting for you to be able to hear her though. To have that new connection with her.”

Blinking, she thought about it, hope growing in her eyes by the second. “I haven’t heard from her since, but finally being able to communicate with her this way would be amazing.”

I doubted anything could mean more to me than witnessing the delight overcome her with the notion. Especially now that her shifting into her wolf became even more difficult.

Cradling her cheek, I brushed my mouth over hers, immediately feeling her melt into me. She claimed my lips that time, her need coming back to the surface as we lay on the bed. My shadows lazily surged then, curling around Natasha, and erasing my sweater from her body.

“It drives me crazy seeing you in my clothes,” I grunted against her lips. “Almost as crazy as it does to see you out of them.”

“Did you truly mean what you said about us?” she asked, biting her lower lip seductively. “That the bond wasn’t just for the two of us, that I could have more?”



“Okay, now,” I immediately interrupted. “Let me be *very* clear about this. Because I may willingly share you with D and Hannes, but let any other motherfucker try to touch you and I swear to the Goddess, I’ll make the *Twilight* consume them so fast they will never even know they stopped existing.”

Laughter erupted from her, while I chuckled, fully enjoying the way our bodies moved together with the gesture.

“I’m serious, Natasha,” I confessed. “I would kill anyone else who dared to touch you.”

“I know,” she whispered, the weight of accepted truths dancing in her eyes.

It was at that moment that I knew she truly loved me for exactly who I was, darkness and all.

“But please try not to kill anyone else. For me?”

Smirking, I claimed her mouth again, hard yet soft, the way I loved to do. “I’ll try, but I can’t promise anything.”

Her grin mixed with our kisses but never stopped them.

It occurred to me then that D was probably torturing himself by thinking Natasha was terrified of him, and that was the reason she ran away. Using the shadows to connect us, I slipped into his mind.

*“It wasn’t you... She heard her wolf speak for the first time in her life and it freaked her out.”* A wave of relief filtered through the shadows, and I was glad I’d reached him. *“Her wolf claimed you, D, and that is what made her runaway... I mean, she was scared by the fangs too, so keep it together, dude. Soon... Now, I’m going to taste her sweet, sweet wetness because you still can’t.”*

I smirked to myself feeling him flip me off, but I centered all of my attention on Natasha. My hand slowly lowered along her chest, immediately intensifying her breaths in anticipation of my touch, and capturing her in my sensual haze. I cupped her breast, massaging it just the way she liked.

However, I let my connection to D open, so the echoes of us would reach him through the shadows. What could I say? I

was feeling generous. The truth was, I wanted him with us, even if it was this way for now...

“Did you like seeing D naked?” I asked, leaning down to her neck, and caressing it with my tongue, more interested in her answer than she could imagine.

“Yes,” Natasha breathed.

“Did you enjoy touching his body?”

“Yes!” she moaned when I squeezed her nipple.

Her nipples had been hard since she arrived from being with D. Her pulse was still accelerated, and I had the sneaking suspicion that she was wet for him. The knowledge of her reacting that way when she was with him, aroused me to no end, and I needed her to know it.

“I love that you feel that way with D,” I murmured against her ear, my length jerking and hardening. “Hearing you confess that makes me so hard.” I shifted my body to lay on top of hers, her legs immediately wrapping around my hips. Pressing my hardness to her center, I let her feel me, relishing the sweet whimper of need that left her mouth. “Do you like that I get hard hearing about you and D?”

“I do,” she admitted, her cheeks flushing red once more. The sight made me want to devour her body.

“Did you get aroused when he kissed you?”

Natasha moaned in response, rubbing against my hardness, and I closed my mouth over hers, claiming her lips again. I wished I’d been there to see him kiss her, to feel her center pulsing under my touch as I made her come in his arms. My body itched for the day when we were both with her.

*Soon...*

Fuck. I wanted to be inside her so badly. I missed the feeling of her.

“Did D get hard with your touch?” I asked, glancing down at her, though her eyes were closed. The expression on her face and the way she slightly shivered, reflected how much she

loved her naked breasts pressed against my chest, while my fingertips trailed the length of her ribs.

Frankly, I knew she'd enjoyed tracing his tattoo just like she did mine, but I was also certain of what her touch could do to us.

"He was so hard," she whimpered, her thighs closing tightly around me in response to the memory.

"Did you want to feel him like that?"

"So badly," she confessed, making me kiss her again—because fuck.

"Did you touch him?"

"Almost..."

My hands resumed their exploration of her, at the same time her touch needily roamed my chest. Slipping both hands into my pants on her, I squeezed her ass, pulling her cheeks apart slightly.

"If he was here with us, right now, would you want him to touch you like this?"

A half-moan, half-gasp escaped her. I fucking loved it when Natasha moaned like that. "Yes."

"Would you want him here with us?"

Her passion-filled eyes opened with the question, and she swallowed, nodding.

"Do you want D to hear us while I make love to you?"

"Yes," she whimpered against my mouth, overcome by the way she felt for us, even when she hadn't begun to understand the true depth of it.

Fuck, she was perfect.

"Did you get wet for him?" I asked, knowing D was listening to us, and I could feel how fucking aroused he was through the connecting darkness.

"So wet," she whimpered in my ear as I began to nibble on her neck. "I'm even more wet now with you."

“Mmm, I want to feel it...” My finger slipped between her parted cheeks, realizing she was drenched before I even got to her heated entrance. “Fuck, Natasha,” I groaned. “You are so fucking drenched for us.”

Another whimper left her when my finger circled her entrance before slipping inside her—gliding like a dream.

D’s groan filtered back in response.

“Take them off,” she begged, my darkness immediately answering her plea and vanishing the pants too—both hers and mine.

Her hands immediately wrapped around my heated shaft, beginning to stroke me. “You are so hard.”

“As hard as D was?” I asked, bringing him back between us.

“He looked just as hard, and I wanted to stroke him so badly,” she admitted. When her eyelids lifted again, her beautiful silverish-blue eyes were drunk with desire.

“Did you fantasize about him?”

“My wolf did.” Her hips lifted off the bed, and she rubbed her drenched skin against my hardness, making it hard to think.

“What did she show you?” I groaned, desperate to taste her, beginning to lower myself on her body. “Tell me, I want to know...” I whispered against her puckered nipple.

My mouth closed over it, sucking it hard before moving to her other breast to give it the same attention.

“He pulled me up onto the bathroom counter!” Natasha moaned as my teeth grazed her nipples. “Parted my legs and slid inside me.”

The tip of my tongue slid along her ribs and stomach, watching her squirm under me as I reached her belly button. I loved teasing her senses as I inched lower, and lower until her hips lifted to meet my mouth. I pulled back, pressing her knees to the mattress on each side, and I admired her delicious, delicate, glistening skin.

“Please...” she panted, ravished with want.

I took a moment to glance up at her. Natasha looked gorgeous in the throes of passion.

Lifting myself for a moment, I placed a gentle kiss on her lips. “If you want me to stop mentioning him, I will,” I offered, not wanting to make her do anything she didn’t want simply because she was aroused with me. “Just tell me you don’t want him, and it will be just the two of—”

“No,” she whimpered, holding my gaze even as her cheeks became impossibly flushed. “She likes it. Please don’t stop.”

And by she, Natasha meant her wolf, which made me smirk fully.

“Are you sure you want him with us this way?” I needed to make sure since her wolf was in such wild heat, I didn’t want that to force her either.

“Yes, I want this too. Please, Dante, don’t stop.” She rubbed her sleek center against my hard length and that was enough thinking for me.

Returning to my rightful place between her legs, I closed my eyes and let her sweet scent fill me. She reached for my head, holding me in place.

“Tell D what you want me to do to you.”

“Taste me,” she whispered, seeming embarrassed but also wanting him to know. “I want you to taste me.”

Returning to my place between her legs, I didn’t make her wait any longer. Her fingers curled around my hair as I closed my mouth over her delicate center, drinking from her.

*“Fuck, dude. I wish you could taste how fucking perfect she is.”*

I reveled in each slow caress of my tongue on her while Natasha’s moans filled the air like a song of ecstasy, louder and louder. She wanted D to hear us. Her body squirmed under my mouth, silently asking for more. My fingers slid in and out of her at the same time, teasing her g-spot while I nibbled and

sucked her to the very last drop. I was ravenous for her, and by the feelings filtering from the other side, so was D.

My shaft throbbed and jerked against the mattress the entire time with the need to be inside her, it was driving me mad, but this was about her, not about me. With each new tremor of her thighs, I sensed how desperate and how close she was to coming on my mouth... the best gift I could have ever received.

“Dante!” she screamed when my teeth gently graced her pulsing knob and then I sucked it, hard.

Hard was always better.

Her legs clamped around my head before she fell off the abyss so fast and fiercely that her entire body trembled on the bed, shaking it.

Smirking, I sucked the most sensitive part of her one last time, licking her delicate skin—now drenched all over again—and lifted myself. Slowly, my body glided against hers to enhance the sensations. Both her arms wrapped around my neck the second I reached the top, and she clung to me, her dazed eyes boring into mine.

“My wolf claimed you too,” Natasha whispered. “Very loudly.”

“Thank the Goddess!”

Laughter mixed with her ragged breaths, and she kissed me, letting me feel just how true and final her wolf’s claim on me was.

I rubbed my head along her wet skin, making her moan once more. “My turn,” I whispered, feeling her grin against my mouth.

My hips lifted and I slowly slid my head inside her, pulling out before sliding back in—just enough to rub against her swollen g-spot. Her insides trembled around me, wanting to pull me farther in, but I loved teasing her, so I kept my rhythm.

Renewed ecstasy filled her, fresh moans leaving her throat, and I closed my mouth over hers, tasting them too. Before I

knew it, she was rising as high as my body could take her, and then tumbling off the abyss for me.

Feeling Natasha orgasm this way was my new favorite thing. I loved it even more because I was the first one to ever make her feel this way, to ever help her enjoy her body.

It took everything inside me not to fall with her. She had the maddening power to make me want to come the second I slid inside her. Every single time.

Her hands suddenly landed on my shoulders, and she flipped us on the bed, straddling me. Frankly, her sudden boldness surprised the shit out of me, but I wouldn't have it any other way. I guessed it was her wolf's turn now, and I was here for it.

Something told me she liked it hard.

I allowed myself to admire Natasha for a moment, appreciating the gentle bounce of her perky breasts and her perfectly puckered rosy nipples. Sleek, all-white strands slipped between my fingers like silk when I swept them off her face.

Holding her gaze, I gripped them firmly in the back of her neck and pulled her head back before my mouth closed over her neck, kissing *our* spot.

A surprised gasp escaped her with my sudden roughness, but she drew me even closer, her hips sinking into me as her arousal doubled with my gesture.

“You like it when I pull your hair like that?” I whispered, my mouth creating a trail down her chest to her breasts and sucking on one of her tight nipples.

“Fuck, yes,” she breathed while I lifted my hips under her slightly, letting my hardness rub over the now swollen, most sensitive part of her.

“Do you want to come again? Over, and over, and over again?” The question brushed against her nipple, right before I bit it. Every inch of her was so mouthwateringly tender and searing hot.

“Yes, please.” Her fingers gripped my hair too, and she pulled my head back until I looked up at her through the longer strand that fell over my eyes. I grinned; she was a quick study.

“Ride me.”

The sensual haze my darkness inspired in her receded for a second as she blinked. “I don’t know how.”

“Yes, you do. Just let your body, your instincts, your wolf take over. She seems a bit freaky... but just a bit.”

Natasha’s gaze narrowed, causing my smirk to fully flourish.

My mouth returned to her neck, leaving a wet kiss there before lifting to her ear. “Lift your ass for me.”

Gripping my shoulders for leverage, she did just as I asked, and my hands pulled her cheeks again, parting her delicate skin until she was open and ready for me. Jerking under her, I guided my hard length to her entrance, once more sliding just the head into her.

“Now, sit on me and fuck me, Natasha.”

A whimper was her only response, but her hips descended on me without hesitation, taking in every rigid, throbbing inch I had to offer. Her eyes shut tightly, and she held her breath, but she didn’t stop until her delicate, soaked skin pressed against my groin, and holy fuck, did she feel delicious.

With how swollen she still was from last night and my teasing just now, her body was gripping me harder than I could ever dream... Yeah, I was going to die tonight.

There was sweet, delicious pain, but even when she winced, it didn’t stop her.

Feeling her body, she began to rock her hips, pulling me out of her only a few inches before pushing me back in with every movement. Her head fell back from the pleasure as she rode me, making my fucking year. Natasha liked it deep and slow, but I was also going to show her how amazing fast and hard could be.



My back abruptly slammed onto the bed again, letting me know she was in charge now, so I graciously bowed down to her. She placed both hands on my chest and tilted her hips backward, changing the angle for us, and making my head push directly against the very end of her. I swore my eyes nearly rolled back when she pulled me out almost completely and then sat on me, hard.

Nature was brilliant.

Pleasure visibly rippled through her with the act, making her breasts bounce, and she gripped my pecks so hard it sent waves of desire straight to my groin. She began to ride me faster, giving in to the growing desperation within her.

Natasha wanted to come so badly that I almost took over to bring her over the edge. It took every ounce of self-control I had not to do it, so I just laid there, letting her feel herself, find herself with me, and enjoy this new side of herself while I had the privilege of witnessing it.

The expression of aching bliss and growing hunger taking over her features was simply breathtaking.

“Harder,” I whispered, squeezing her bouncing breasts because I wasn’t exactly a saint, and to my delight, she followed my command.

Unexpectedly, her ethereal, powerful gaze bored into mine, reaching into my core. Bands of shadows left my being in response to her silent call, each dancing around her naked body with delight.

Natasha looked so beautiful wrapped in my darkness.

“Harder.” My command returned, and she lifted her hips even higher before letting them crash against me again, and again, *and* again.

She was enjoying this as much as I was, and from the powerful waves of ecstasy crashing through my shadow link, I knew we weren’t the only ones.

The intensified sensations her sensual dance on me caused, swiftly gripped every inch of us. Natasha struggled for breath, but she didn’t stop, it only made her want it more. Frankly, the

way her heated walls stroked me with each thrust threatened to steal my sanity.

My hands lowered to her hips, holding her in place when she began to fall off the abyss, her moans reverberating loudly through the room and making me jerk inside her with need. When her hips stopped from the overwhelming rush of pleasure, I began to pump into her deeply, just like she had ridden me, maintaining the pace to prolong her fall.

*Holy fucking shit!*

Okay, that was enough.

Turning our bodies, I lifted her ankles to my shoulders and anchored my knees on the mattress, plunging into her harder, faster, deeper. The new position triggered a fresh wave of orgasms for her, and she gasped before juicy moans ripped from the deepest part of her being.

“Dante!” Natasha screamed yet again, making my day. Her hands flew to my neck, gripping me in place while her insides constricted wildly around me.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I groaned, thrusting faster and faster each time while raging fire engulfed my throbbing shaft. I was going to explode so fucking hard.

“Harder,” she breathed against my mouth, and her request sent me over the edge.

A shudder rushed through my spine, settling in my groin and my entire body shook from the force of our release. I exploded for her. That couldn’t make me stop though. I drove into her with every ounce of energy I had, giving Natasha exactly what she wanted, what we needed, while I lost myself in her.

Sanity be damned.

# 21

NATASHA

**M**y lips couldn't help but to softly place kiss after kiss along Dante's chest, enjoying every brush of our skin as I went. Smiling between kisses, my body still singing from the way he'd loved me last night, I caressed his pecs and abs, with my wolf indulgingly stirring inside me.

*"Mine..."* her satisfied declaration echoed through me, much softer than it had been last night, but just as powerful.

*"Yes, he is ours,"* I agreed, the notion making every inch of me feel alive, happy, and safe.

Dante had made me feel safe since the very first time he touched me.

Renewed need coursed through me when I lifted my gaze to his face. That messy yet perfectly placed strand fell over his eyes again, so I brushed it with my fingers before placing a kiss on his neck. The urge from my wolf to bite him and draw blood in the true claim of him became all-consuming, but I wasn't sure he'd even welcome it since he wasn't a Wolf Shifter like me.

*"He does enjoy a little pain..."*

My eyes widened at my wolf's boldness but given that she was driven by the heat Dante awoke in her, it shouldn't have surprised me. It seemed surreal to me that I could hear her thoughts now, as though I was talking to another person, but

that was what Wolf Shifters were—two sides of the same being, two existences in one.

Memories from our lovemaking flourished in my mind thanks to her, and my cheeks flushed again while I recalled Dante's questions and mentions of D as he did naughty things to me. The feelings he caused by embracing the way my wolf and I, the way my body reacted to D, returned, making my nipples tingle.

I'd enjoyed that more than I wanted to admit, and at one point, it had *felt* like D was with us, loving me too. Of course, I knew it was insane. I knew he hadn't been in the room even if I'd wanted him to be, but as Dante touched me, kissed me, and loved me, the overwhelming feeling of D's presence captured my being, taking me even higher.

It surprised me how willing Dante was to have D with us, how much he enjoyed seeing me aroused by the idea of D. Still, what surprised me the most was how much thinking of him listening to me coming and moaning for Dante excited me.

*"We are all yours..."*

My wolf stirred with the notion of D, Dante, and Hannes being mine, ours, but I still couldn't understand how that was even possible. Was it real? Could I have them all? My center clenched with need at the thought, and I forced my eyes closed.

When I glanced at Dante again, my mate, I grinned—he seemed so peaceful and utterly relaxed after last night. Licking his neck, I indulged in the taste of his skin, nibbling and kissing it the same way he did mine until his lips parted, a moan escaping him. I immediately understood why he loved me moaning for him so much. There was nothing like knowing that it was you provoking those feelings in the person you loved.

*Wait. Did I just say I loved Dante?!*

*"You sure did..."* my smart-ass wolf answered, and I glanced up at him as the feeling took hold of me, asserting its

place in my heart.

As I thought of the way he'd been there for me, healed me, risked everything for me—even his wellbeing to save Isis—I knew it was impossible for me not to because, with his every action since the day I met him, he'd shown me what love truly was.

“I love you,” I whispered against his ear before my mouth closed over his.

A couple of seconds later, his mouth began to dance against mine, his tongue caressing mine as he turned the kiss into a full-blown affair. He made my body ache, and I dragged myself over him, straddling him like I had last night.

“I'm awake. I'm awake,” he rasped when I pressed into his lap, his hands gripping my hips. With the way his body started to react underneath me, I knew it was true.

Chuckling, I kissed him again, creating a trail along his jaw and down to his neck.

“You love me, huh?” Dante whispered, and I lifted my head to look at him.

“You heard me?”

His smirk said everything before he reclaimed my mouth, his hands slipping into my long hair.

“I want to bite you...” I murmured over his mouth, low-key nervous that he would think I was crazy.

The haze of desire *and* approval instantly swirled in his eyes. “Do you?”

“Yes.”

“You don't need my permission to claim me, Natasha... Bite me.”

The most delicious sensation rushed through me, my wolf's canines extending in response, and I brought my mouth to his ear. “You have no idea what those words just did to me.”

“Actually, I do. You are getting so wet right now... If only I'd known that was all it took.”

Chuckling, I smacked his arm.

“Bite me...” he repeated, making my stomach dip with longing.

The tip of my tongue licked his neck, and my eyes closed with the taste of him before my mouth pressed against it, kissing the spot right on the curve. Every muscle in Dante’s body tensed in anticipation, a second before my four canines pierced his skin.

His fingers curled into my hips fiercely, and a drawn-out moan erupted from his lips, the sensations ignited by my bite making him harden under me.

I only stopped when I drew blood.

“Mine,” I declared against his ear before pulling back and sitting up on top of him. My heart thundered in my ears from the overwhelming feelings rushing through me.

Dante’s eyes tried to open a couple of times while he panted, his chest quivering under my hands, causing my wolf and I to rejoice in the effect our bite had left on him.

“Holy fucking shit,” he croaked, finally pulling his eyes wide open before swallowing. “I had no idea a wolf claim could be so powerful.” His gaze found my face and he sat up too, cradling my cheeks before he kissed me.

He wasn’t wrong, my muscles trembled with the rush crashing through me as I glanced back at him.

The passion our kiss unleashed after being fully bonded this way was unlike anything we had shared so far, and it captured every inch of me.

“Make love to me,” I asked while our breaths mixed, his lips stretching into a sensual smirk.

“As you wish... but first, I have a gift for you.”

“A gift?” Excitement instantly rushed through me.

“Close your eyes.”

His shadows brushed my naked skin when I did as he asked, engulfing me whole. Suddenly, I was no longer in the

bed with him...

I was in his *Twilight*.

The most beautiful night sky surrounded me at every turn—above, below, and at either side of me. Shimmering clouds of stardust drifted above my head and between my feet, while tiny twinkling stars danced along my skin.

There was no beginning and no end. Only the eternal night of the *Twilight*.

A chilled breeze caressed my body, the skirt of my white dress billowing along my legs just as a brilliant starburst appeared across from me. I expected to see Dante, dressed in white, coming to share his darkness with me, but what materialized before me as the brilliance receded was someone I never expected to see.

The gorgeous white wolf stood proudly before me, the hairs of her lush and thick coat dancing with the breeze too. Power exuded from every inch of her graceful yet commanding presence, asserting her place in the cosmos.

It was my wolf.

Emotion rushed through me as I began to walk, seeing her stride toward me too. I almost fell to my knees the second we reached each other, but on all fours, she was still taller than I was. I lifted a hand to her full mane, wishing more than anything that I could feel her. Her eyes closed when my fingers miraculously slipped through the soft locks of her coat and tears instantly escaped me.

I could truly feel her.

“*I’m Starlight,*” she announced, and my arms wrapped around her fiercely.

“*Hi, Starlight.*”

She nuzzled my cheek, as though to return my hug, and the most powerful feeling of love I had ever experienced flowed from her and into me, overwhelming me. Starlight’s affection for me erased any pain or sorrow I had ever felt without her.

Much like the *Twilight*, her love for me was eternal... and so was mine.

“*You have never been alone, Natasha,*” she swore, making me lean away to look into her eyes. The entire cosmos shone inside them as Dante’s did during the night, so I knew it was only the effect of his magic, but I didn’t care.

“*I love you, Starlight,*” I whispered.

“*I love you too...*”

The darkness slowly receded but her presence remained.

“Was that her, or an illusion?” I asked, tears falling down my face when I glanced at Dante again.

“It was Starlight,” he reassured, his voice captured by emotion too. “I just created a ‘bridge’ for you to meet through my darkness. It was real.”

“Thank you,” I sniffed, wrapping my arms around him fiercely, just like I had with her.

Dante just held me, his fingers gently stroking my back while the remarkable feelings lessened in me.

“Are you okay?” he finally asked, glancing into my eyes before kissing the tears off my cheek.

“I’m okay.” I nodded, placing a soft kiss on his lips. “I just thought I wouldn’t get to meet her now that I’ll never shift.”

“Never say never, Natasha... *Fire ceremony* or not, we *will* find a way,” he vowed. Naughtiness filled his expression the next moment, and I already knew why. “Now, can we return to the whole ‘*make love to me*’ request?”

A few chuckles escaped me while his hands pulled me closer.

“I’m just saying. I’m ready when you a—” Dante’s eyes abruptly widened, his expression hardening with alarm just as something rushed over the glass wall. “Get back!” he ordered, pulling me off the bed with him, like I weighed nothing, and pushing me far behind him.



“What’s happening?!” I asked while two more creatures ran impossibly fast along the building. Their forms blurring.

Those were *not* Wolf Shifters.

“Fuck!” Dante cursed when something ran into the glass doors, shattering through them and sending shards all around us while it lunged forward.

“Aaah!” I jumped back against the wall as a reflex, but Dante shot a stream of *Twilight* at the creature before it could reach us, exploding it into a million pieces and splattering its black, putrid blood all over the walls.

Another came at him, then another, and another, then a few more, but his streams shot at them without failure. Still, many, many more inched over the balcony railing. Noises came from the rest of the penthouse, saying the others were facing the same *things* just as Dante attempted to shoot again... Unfortunately, the shadows failed him.

There wasn’t enough darkness in the bright light of the new day for him to wield.

“D, I need power!” he roared, but the seconds it took for him to somehow help Dante, the creatures snuck inside the room.

Dante ran to me, shielding me with his body while trying to summon his *Twilight*. The breath caught in my throat as I watched deformed creatures, deprived of thought, logic, or feeling crawl over the walls, floors, and ceiling like spiders. Venom dripped from their fangs as they hissed, crazy, dead eyes focused on me.

Their bodies were humanoid with arms and legs, but the skin seemed carved over the muscles, reminiscing of an anatomy drawing of the human body.

I knew what they were before Dante answered.

“*Force-fed creatures called the crawlers,*” Bjørn’s voice echoed in my ears. “*Trust me, you never want to see one of those...*”

Were those the “Vampires” my uncle had warned me about? Using them to manipulate me through fear my entire life? Were those the creatures that really killed my parents?

Something slammed against the other side of the wall, in D’s room, and a shriek of pain echoed, calling the creatures’ attention for a split second before it returned to me. They were taunting us, getting dangerously close to us.

“I got you!” D finally replied, and the next second, the sky outside the window darkened—like a cloud had suddenly chosen to hide the sun.

“About fucking time!” Dante retorted sucking bands of shadows toward him like a vacuum, and then darkness exploded from him.

The blast swept over the dozen crawlers in the room, literally vanishing them—not even a single particle left of them. I realized then what Dante truly meant by having his *Twilight* consume someone.

He whirled around to face me. “Are you okay?”

I nodded, although my blood felt frozen inside my veins, my breaths were barely reaching my lungs, and I wasn’t exactly sure my heart was still beating. “Yes.”

“Helipad, now!” he shouted, glancing at no one behind him, so I assumed he was calling to the others.

A blanket of *Twilight* surged from his core, extending along the balcony just as a new wave of *crawlers* appeared. They slammed against it like it was an iron wall, causing their screams and shrieks of rage to echo through the air.

“That will keep them away for a bit.” When his attention returned to me, he cupped my cheeks. “I’m sorry, but there is no time for choices.”

Bands of darkness swirled around both of us when he pulled me by the hand, running out of the room. By the time we reached the hallway, full outfits and shoes covered our bodies—his was black, as usual, while I was entirely dressed in winter white.

“Why are they here?!” Vanessa panted, bursting out of her room at the same time while wiping splatters of black blood from her skin with a t-shirt. She threw it on the floor.

“They are after Natasha,” D answered, reaching us too.

“Why?” I asked, startled.

“We have no idea,” Isis added, and I turned to see her entering the other hall with the Fae, though she was heavily relying on him to walk before he *blinked* them to the elevator.

She seemed worse than I’d left her last night.

“Go!” Dante ordered, letting go of the wall of darkness around the joined balconies to engulf the elevator instead. We all rushed toward it.

He pressed his thumb to the panel until a tiny door popped open, but the earsplitting screeches and hisses reached us as he pressed it.

“Close, damn it!” Vanessa urged the slow-moving doors while we watched the creatures inundate the penthouse, moving over the ceiling, walls, and floors, like roaches—all coming toward me.

I gasped, taking a step into the back wall when one of them tried to jump into the elevator, deformed claws reaching for me. The swaying dark shield sliced its hand on contact as the doors closed. The limb jerked on the floor like it was still alive before it disintegrated with the shadows.

Isis and the others’ voices partially filtered into my ears, someone even grabbing my hand without getting a response. I could do nothing except stare at the elevator doors as though they were still open, the crawlers rushing toward me. The deformed, enraged face of the one who reached for me was etched into my mind, venom dripping from its fangs.

I couldn’t feel the oxygen going into my lungs. I couldn’t blink. I couldn’t move.

The fear instilled in me my entire life was all too real and debilitating.

“Natasha!” Isis called, partially bringing me out of it as Bjørn wrapped his arms around us both.

We *blinked*, his actions taking me out of the already open elevator and onto the open space before us. We had arrived at what Dante called the helipad, but I hadn’t even noticed.

“Look at me,” Isis urged, standing before me. “Natasha!”

Blinking, I finally saw her distressed face, and she breathed a sigh of relief, hugging me.

“I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to be sorry about, baby girl,” she assured.

When I glanced past her, I saw nothing in the helipad that could help us leave, but Vanessa and the others were taking a stance on the open roof of the building, forming a circle around Isis and me while a storm brewed in the sky above us. Isis held on to me for support and I held on to her, helping her.

My gaze returned to the sky, and I wondered who was doing that, was it Dante or D? Was it both of them?

Before I passed out when the Hunters attacked us at the diner, I thought I’d imagined seeing D somehow manipulate light, now I knew I’d truly seen him do it.

To my dismay, crawlers overwhelmed the roof while human screams rose from the streets below—their terror palpable. What seemed like hundreds of those things climbed over the edges of the building, all trying to get to me.

Without hesitation, Vanessa transformed like she had at the diner, crimson overcoming her eyes and lips, fangs, and claws in full display as she hunched over and hissed, swiping at them. D’s wings snapped out of his back as he squared up to them, lunging the creatures off the roof one by one when they jumped at him. Dante’s shadow streams began to shoot out of him, power obscuring his forest-green eyes until no white could be seen—only swirling pools of darkness.

Bjørn’s hood fell back with the growing winds to show his long golden hair turning slate grey, and flowing behind him

while his twisted claws reappeared. Muscles seemed to bulk under his clothes, partially ripping his sweater, and that sky-shattering sound he'd emitted in the mountain erupted from him again. His twisted claws swung at the pouncing creatures, shredding through them with terrifying ease.

He turned to make sure no creatures had reached us, and when I saw his face, a gasp stalled in my throat. His usually pale skin had fully blackened, his irises becoming bright red like glowing fire, and two horns protruded from his forehead. Unlike the wolves, the crawlers didn't cower in fear of him since there was no logic in them, but at that moment, I realized that my worst fear had come true. I was surrounded by monsters...

Yet, every one of them had chosen to become their own kind of *monster* to save my life.

The sound of a powerful machine ripped through the sky the next instant, and I looked up through my whipping hair to see it slowly centering itself above us. After ripping apart arms and legs from two crawlers, Vanessa rushed to our side, helping us out of the way while the flying machine began to descend.

"Is that an airplane?" I shouted over the noise, watching the protective circle widen around us to let the machine land on the roof.

"A helicopter!" Vanessa informed me when it touched down.

"More like a flying house," Isis groaned, holding her side.

The door opened, and Ralf stepped out, setting stairs for us to use.

"Go, go, go!" D ordered, swinging four creatures off him as he flew over the roof's edge.

My frantic gaze snapped to Dante to see him shooting at several crawlers too, even Bjørn was surrounded, his twisted claws dripping with black blood. "We can't leave them!"

"We are not!" Ralf assured, urgently holding his hand out to help us get on the machine.

Vanessa jumped on it first, turning to lift Isis from the inside while I helped her from behind. My hands lifted to her back, to push her up, but never reached her. A crawler rammed her away from us.

“Isis!” Vanessa yelled.

It took a split second for me to decide if, like the others, I was willing to become a monster for the people I loved.

The answer was yes.

Calling on Starlight for help, I lunged myself at the creature just as two more came for us. Grey wolf claws protruded from my fingers without pain, ripping into the crawler and flinging it off Isis with our joint strength, while Vanessa tackled another. Tattered muscles dangled from the one I threw over the edge of the roof, and I faced a shocked Isis, only to find the third one coming at us.

“Natasha!” Isis’ horrified shout echoed when the creature’s sharp claws sliced across my chest to my stomach.

“Aaah!” Fiery heat ignited in my core from the pain, and my partially shifted hands gripped the crawler’s face. I had no idea what drove me, but looking into its dead eyes, I growled. “Burn.”

Bright blue flames erupted from my hands, rushing through me like wildfire and engulfing the creature in seconds. The blaze took over once I let go, pulling disturbing shrieks out of the jerking crawler as it consumed it fully, leaving nothing but black ashes on the ground.

Struggling to breathe, I felt nothing but the thunderous crashing of my heart against my ribs, and I glanced down at my hands.

What the hell had I just done?

The fear Bjørn’s monster hadn’t provoked in the crawlers, the sight of the blue fire did. They froze in place.

A roar of rage and torment ripped from Dante when his eyes found me, realizing I’d been attacked while they were

overwhelmed by the crawlers. A dangerous wave of powerful *Twilight* exploded from him.

Jumping, Bjørn touched D's wing, *blinking* them to our side before the lethal darkness could sweep through them, and instantly incinerate them like it did the hundreds of crawlers that had surrounded them.

Dante disappeared into the darkness, reemerging before me.

Throbbing agony awoke in me when our eyes met, making me double over as he lifted me into his arms, getting me into the helicopter. My entire body trembled, blood staining the delicate white outfit, but his healing shadows surged into my chest without hesitation.

Bjørn, once more the Golden Fae, carried Isis inside too while D's tortured eyes followed me.

He entered last, locking the door just as more crawlers invaded the helipad, running toward us and jumping on the flying machine when it lifted to the sky. We wobbled for a moment, but the blades cut clear through the creatures, sending the bleeding pieces to scatter over the roof of the building.

Despite what we had just endured, the ride on the helicopter was almost as soothing as Dante's healing magic. It steadily swayed through my being, vanishing the ragged slashes that creature carved into me, though blood still stained my torn white suit. It felt like Dante just couldn't bring himself to let go of me.

I couldn't blame him; I didn't want to let him go either.

My face rested on his chest, loving that he'd unbuttoned his shirt so I could feel his warm skin against my cheek. He always seemed to know exactly what I needed. We lay together in one of the sofas, and I mentioned "one of" because Isis had been right—this flying machine was as big inside as our cabin was.

The space was arranged to look like a living room, with two sofas placed in an L shape, a table, a corner bar, and two comfortable armchairs across. There was even a TV. It was on, but no one was watching.

On the sofa beside ours, Bjørn sat with Isis lying along the length of it, her head resting on his lap. She'd fallen asleep while Dante's hand cradled her ankle, administering the healing he hadn't been able to finish when he passed out—all at the same time.

Bjørn's gaze never reached me. He glanced out the window instead, avoiding my gaze at all costs.

Before me, both Vanessa and D sat on the large armchairs, side by side. She, too, had snoozed off while D's intense stare



was poised on me. I didn't mind it though, because as he observed me, I observed him too. I could still see the fear he'd felt when the crawler attacked me carved onto his features, and my chest hurt in response.

Much like Dante, he was tormented by the fact that neither of them had been able to get to me, to protect me.

Sadness fiercely coiled along my wolf and me at the notion. I hated that Dante and D had to witness that happen to me, because as confused as I was by the whole, "having three mates" situation, I couldn't deny how strongly D made me feel. A storm raged behind his eyes like he wanted to say so much but didn't think he should.

"What are the crawlers," I asked, bringing him out of his self-imposed torture.

Blinking, D took a disturbed breath. "They are humans who were forced-fed Vampire blood on the brink of dying. Not enough to turn them, only to make them addicted to it."

"They don't give it to them fresh either, so it will only heal them enough to keep them on the edge of death while the process is completed," Vanessa finished for him, waking up. "Our blood is more powerful when fresh from our veins."

"Blood slaves," I whispered, horrified, to see Vanessa painfully nod.

"They were created by the losing side of the Vampiri War, while they still held power over the human world. Unfortunately, some of their loyal followers still don't accept the *Dracul Dynasty* or the countess as their one and only ruler," D explained.

My forehead deeply furrowed. "Do you think they are the ones who sent the crawlers after me?"

Dante and D exchanged an apprehensive look, increasing my puzzlement. "We can't be sure yet."

"But what could they possibly want with me?"

"We don't know... but we are going to fucking find out," D hissed.

“We are almost there, my lord!” Ralf announced from the front, where he flew this thing, and everyone turned to glance out the window.

“You should see this,” Dante whispered, kissing my cheek, and helping me sit upright.

“What is that?” I gasped, taken aback. I’d never seen anything like it, at least not out of one of those picture books I saw when I was a child.

“It’s called *Heart Island*,” D answered with a small smile, apparently liking my reaction. “We are in *Alexandria Bay, New York*.”

“And *that*,” Dante added, “is the Viscountess’ castle.”

Holy shit. That was a real-life castle. “Like the ones kings live in?” I asked because that was the extent of my knowledge.

“Just like that,” Vanessa offered. “I love this place. I wish we could live here full time.”

My attention returned to the island to find a winter wonderland.

Snow covered the grounds and leafless trees, much like it did at the mountain, making the branches seem as though they carried fully white flowers of ice. It also sprinkled over the castle standing tall against the sky, a building unlike anything I’d ever seen, not even in the picture books.

It was entirely built of cream-hued rectangular stones—bricks, I thought they were called—and the multiple triangular tops that formed its roof were an orangey-red, allowing the castle to beautifully contrast against the sea blues and winter whites that surrounded it.

Snow also adorned the spires and towers of the castle, blanketing the reddish roof and the many structures that extended through the land.

The island was exclusive to the castle, which told me we would be safe there. Although other smaller islands were fairly close, they were far smaller than this, and the closest solid piece of land was a good few miles away.

“The castle’s staff lives in those,” Vanessa explained as I regarded the smaller islands with houses. Though even the “smaller” houses seemed huge.

Anastasia’s island, however, was perched in the middle of the bay, as though it was the most important there. A few boats were parked around the harbor area, as well as a bunch of smaller open structures that almost seemed like a market. It had beautiful large gardens, parks, and smaller bridges throughout the space.

We tilted right as the helicopter flew around the castle once—with Ralf identifying himself through the radio and asking permission to land. The maneuver gave me a great view of the entire fortress’s surroundings before we began to descend toward a stretch of land marked exactly like the roof of the building had been.

Dante stood first, helping me to my feet while Ralf turned everything off and opened the door, setting the stairs down for us. I turned to help Isis, but she sat up on her own, seeming fully healed and clearheaded. Thankfully, Dante had left her good as new at last.

Glancing up at him, eternally grateful, I pulled him down by the lapels and stood on my tiptoes, placing a kiss on his pouty lips. His eyes sparked to life for the first time since the attack, loving my gesture.

“Come on, baby girl.” Isis nudged me, guiding us down the path and away from the loud, hair-blowing blades.

We stepped into the first structure that connected to the pathway of the helipad, which looked like a mini version of Anastasia’s castle—completely made of grey stone.

The others followed us inside it, but I stopped, turning to wait for the Fae.

Every muscle on Bjørn’s face hardened when he reached me, but I didn’t let him look away. “You can’t avoid me forever.”

The harshness turned into pain, and he sighed.

“I’m sorry you had to see me like that, Natasha. I truly hoped that would never hap—” His words halted when I jumped him—the only way I would be able to wrap my arms around his neck—hugging him. The tension immediately melted from his being, and he gave into my hug, cradling me to him.

“Thank you for giving into the part of you that you hate the most, to make sure I was safe,” I whispered into his ear. “You have a piece of my heart now.”

His hold trembled around me for a second before he squeezed me fiercely, kissing my temple like a father probably would. “And now you know my secret.” He pulled back to look into my eyes, but before I could ask if his *other self* was his secret, he smiled. “There is nothing I would not do for you either, dearie.”

I hugged him again, kissing his cheek before he set me on my feet. When we faced the others, their emotion was evident. Ralf joined us then, leading us through the mini castle that seemed like a welcome center to what I thought would be a pathway to the main structure. Instead, he opened the door of a car so long it looked like two glued together.

“It’s called a limousine,” Isis explained, and I nodded, following everyone inside it.

Ralf drove us around the grounds until we reached what I thought was the entrance to the structure. I was wrong. We crossed a long bridge over the water, that looked way smaller from above, and then stopped at a security house outside a massive gate that blocked our view. Ralf once again had to identify himself and ask permission to enter, but the large gates opened for us immediately, revealing a winding road to the castle.

When we finally arrived at the half-moon-looking entrance, a man in uniform stepped outside, pausing by the car as Ralf opened the doors for us.

“My lord...” He deeply bowed to Dante, or so I thought, until I realized he was facing D.

My eyes widened. My lord?! What the heck was D a lord of? And why was this the first time I heard about it?

I glanced at him, seeing him graciously nod in return without correcting him.

“My lord,” the man greeted Dante with a deep bow of his waist too, although he took several steps away from him to do so, then greeted Isis, Vane, and I, proceeding to request our luggage.

Frowning, I looked up at Dante, but his expression did not indicate what that was. He simply stared at the man indifferently, not bothering to graciously nod in return like D had.

Disappointed there was no luggage to take, the man turned on his heel to leave, but his gaze briefly stopped on me. He masked the shock well, swiftly walking away, but once again his behavior was weird.

“Here,” Dante offered, handing me his coat.

I was about to say I didn’t need it when I caught sight of my torn jacket drenched in blood. Nodding, I put it on and walked between him and Isis to the wooden double doors.

“Welcome to *Roşu Castle*. Headquarters to the Vampire Clan of North America, Ms. Natasha,” an older woman in an elegant sand-colored dress greeted me the instant the large double doors opened. “Ms. Isis, Ms. Vanessa, my lords,” she offered, stepping back, and gesturing us inside the castle.

“Would you like coffee or tea?” a young woman asked, walking out of a side hallway with what appeared to be a two-tier cart made of pure gold.

An elegant tray was set on top with two metallic pots that I assumed held the coffee and tea she’d offered, plus a few small containers. The bottom tier had another tray filled with delicate-looking cups over plates with tiny colorful flowers and gold on them.

“Coffee please, with two sugars and a dash of cream,” Vanessa immediately answered, accepting the elegant cup and plate handed to her after the girl happily prepared it.

“Tea with honey, please,” Isis requested, and another cup was handed to her. “You should try it, Tasha, it’s really good.”

“It will help you relax after the unfortunately stressful journey you’ve had,” the young girl offered, receiving a reproaching look from the older lady that said her opinion wasn’t required. “Sorry,” she mumbled.

“That’s very kind of you. I’ll have one like Isis’, please,” I replied, smiling at the girl, and seeing her beam, handing me a cup too.

“My lord?” she asked D, who shook his head.

“May I please have some soda and water sent to my room? Thank you.”

Her light smile reappeared when she eagerly nodded, then immediately faltered once her gaze moved to Dante, who stood behind me now. “And you, my Lord?” her voice quivered with the words. “Would you like coffee or tea?” Her gaze lowered to her hands, awaiting his answer.

Why did everyone here act so strange toward him?

“I’ll have tea with three sugars, a dash of milk, a drop of honey, and a biscuit.”

I glanced back at him, confused by his explicit instruction, but shrugged it off to see the girl prepare it. Maybe he was just picky about his tea. Instead of handing it to him, she placed it on the edge of the cart and pushed it closer to him. Dante remained in place, so she pushed it a bit closer. Nothing.

Receiving a glare from the older woman, the girl stiffened and picked up the plate with the teacup and biscuit, extending her hand towards him though she was still too far for him to reach it. Dante arched a challenging brow at her, and the girl began to take small steps, extending her arms farther so he could take it.

He didn’t.

When her hands began to tremble, the cup tinkling against the plate more and more I realized she was terrified of him. No, not of him. Of his deathly darkness.

The others grumbled under their breaths, while Dante just stood there, forcing the poor girl to get close to him. The older lady didn't say a word to help her, expecting the girl to do her job and deliver the lord's drink.

"You know, what? I can give it to him," I offered, stepping closer to the girl, but Dante lifted a single hand, seeming bored by the spectacle.

"No need," he sighed. "I just remembered I don't drink tea."

"Dante!" I gasped, smacking his arm, hard. He'd put that poor girl through all that for nothing.

His lips twitched as he glanced down at me, but he didn't let the smile take over them.

D pinched the bridge of his nose, probably wanting to sucker punch Dante, and I was tempted to encourage it.

My incredulous gaze returned to my mate, not believing he would be so cruel knowing these people were terrified of him. And then something struck me. Lifting my hand to his cheek, I called his gaze to me, seeing the sliver of resentment and pain hidden within the shadows of his gaze. A truth revealed to no one else but me.

Instantly, I realized why he had begged me to never fear him.

For two hundred years, humans had feared him so much that they didn't even want to come near him after realizing who he was. Or *what* he was in their eyes. His own power had once killed the woman he loved, but they didn't care about his suffering. The only thing people saw when they looked at him was the deathly *Lord of Twilight*.

Dante was far, far more than that, but they never gave him a chance to show them that, did they?

Stepping closer to him, I took his hand in mine, pulling on his lapel again to kiss him. The darkness intensified in his eyes right before his mouth closed on mine, recognizing that I knew the depth of his true feelings.

A loud gasp escaped the young girl when I let go of him, and she glanced at me in panic while his shadows danced around my body, caressing me with love. Facing her again, I looked into her eyes, letting her know he was mine, and I could never fear him.

“Very well,” the old woman interjected, having seen enough. “Allow me to escort you to your rooms so you can refresh and change before meeting the Viscountess. She is expecting you.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t have any clothes to change into,” I replied, we had left everything in Dante’s apartment.

“The closets are stocked with everything you might need,” the woman offered, and without another word, she turned, leading us toward the grand staircase.

My gaze jumped from one place to the next as we walked, absolutely mesmerized by such beauty. From the off-whites, the golds, the crystal chandeliers the polished wooden surfaces, and even the white and obsidian stone floors, everything exuded elegance and power. I had no idea what the details carved onto the ceilings were called but I had never seen anything like it.

It occurred to me then that after meeting D and the others I had done, and seen, many things I never had before in my life. In one way or another, I’d experienced all my *firsts* with them.

Turning before we reached the grand staircase; the lady led us to an elevator instead.

“There’s an elevator here?” I whispered, seeing the woman turn to look at me over her shoulder.

“Ms. Natasha, *Roşu Castle* is six stories high and has one hundred and twenty rooms, of course, we have an elevator.”

We stopped at the third floor, and she gestured us outside. We followed. “I leave you to your rooms,” she began. “Your temporary room, Ms. Natasha, is right next to Ms. Isis’.”

“Thank you, Edith. I’ll guide her there,” Isis assured, and the woman graciously bowed at us.



“Do let me know if you need anything at all.”

With that, Edith reentered the elevator and left.

We all walked in the same direction, and I was relieved to see that like in Dante’s penthouse, all our rooms were next to each other.

“We’ll see you later,” Vanessa offered and entered her room a few doors down, probably eager to wash the crawler muck off her body. I couldn’t blame her.

Kissing my lips, Dante leaned into my ear. “I’ll only be two doors away, but I’ll leave my shadows connected to you. If you need me, just call me in your mind.”

Glancing at me like it physically hurt him to leave my side, he turned around and entered his room. D didn’t say a word, but we exchanged a glance before he followed the others, closing his door behind him.

When my attention returned to Bjørn and Isis, I found them sharing a gentle kiss. “I don’t have shadows to leave connected to you, my luv. But if you scream, I might hear you,” he teased Isis, making me chuckle while she rolled her eyes.

Winking at me, even as she pushed him away, he took the room right across from us. That left the two rooms behind us.

We entered the one on the right, the interior as soft, elegant, and stunning as the ground floor of the castle.

“Tasha,” Isis called when I placed the fancy teacup and plate on the dresser, I hadn’t even tasted it yet, but I turned to face her. “How did you do that? With the fire?” Concern clouded her voice as she reached for my hand.

“I don’t know.” I sighed, as concerned as she was. “I think it was Starlight trying to save me.”

“Starlight?”

“My wolf,” I confessed. “Dante introduced me to her through his *Twilight* this morning, and I know that’s her name now... I can hear her too. She speaks to me.”

Wonder and intrigue shone in her eyes. “Fascinating.”

“Is that normal for a Wolf Shifter?” I asked her but she shook her head.

“I’ve never heard of it before, but it doesn’t mean is not natural for the two of you.” Her words were meant to reassure me, but I could see the sliver of trepidation in her eyes. “Now, change your clothes so we can go meet the Viscountess. She must be anxious to see you.”

“Can I shower first?” I frowned, seeing Isis nervously rush to the closet, pulling out a beautiful white dress for me.

“I’m afraid there is no time.”

“What do you mean there is no time? I literally just survived inhuman creatures trying to kill me. I know she’s trying to help me, but the least she can do is give me time to take a shower!”

“Natasha don’t be rude,” she scolded. “I raised you better than that.”

“I’m sorry,” I sighed, “but I don’t even know who she is.” My gaze fell on the dress. “Can I at least wear pants and a sweater?”

Isis stopped for a moment, looking into my eyes, and guided me to sit on the bed with her.

“My sweet baby girl,” she began, cradling my cheek. “I’m truly sorry it’s all happening this way, but we are here now, and we must move forward. The Viscountess sent me into your life to watch over you all these years. That is my truth. I was nothing before she found me. Before she sent me to your side, and everything I have ever told you about you giving meaning to my life, and how much I love you it’s true. I love you like you were my own daughter, Natasha. Meeting you changed my life and I’m forever grateful.”

I pulled her into a hug, eyes glistening. “I love you too.”

Isis’ tearful smile reached me as she pulled away, and she caressed my hair tenderly. “After you finally meet the Viscountess, everything will become clear, and I swear I’ll

answer any questions you have... She has waited a long time for this day to arrive, baby. Please give me this.”

Hugging her once more, I soaked in the familiar feeling of family she'd always given me. I could give her more than that.

Standing, I removed my slashed clothes, and cleaned myself, slipping into the next outfit she pulled for me—soft, wide-leg pants and a fitted turtleneck sweater, all in white.

What was it with everyone dressing me in white?

Her hands nervously brushed my hair again, making sure it was perfect before she took a deep breath, stepping back to look at me as a proud smile curved her lips. “Beautiful.”

“Thank you.” I reached for the teacup, taking the first sip just as a knock sounded at the door. Isis and I exchanged a glance. “I thought we were getting out of the room to meet her.”

She waved to me like it didn't matter but I couldn't help the swell of nerves that captured my being all of a sudden, making the teacup slightly tremble on its plate in my hold.

When Isis opened the door, a couple came into the room, confusing me.

“I'm sorry we haven't given you enough time to rest after getting here, but someone was being a bit of an *antsy pants* and wanted to meet you,” the man playfully offered, and the skin at the corners of his kind greyish-blue eyes wrinkled when he smiled.

He was as tall as Bjørn, which was saying something, his body was muscular and fit for an older man, but he still looked *very* handsome, even with the silver strands sneaking through his short brown hair. It made me think he might be in his early fifties, not that I was an expert in aging.

When my gaze shifted to the famous Viscountess, I was stunned. She was nothing like I'd imagined. During the past few days, my mind had conjured the image of an old and harsh woman with long black hair and hard lines on her weathered face. Instead, a much younger woman, maybe in her forties like Isis, stood across from me.

Her hair was obsidian black, but that was about the only thing I'd gotten right because it was short in a sleek, angled cut that reached her neck. She had crystalline green eyes and softly tanned skin. She seemed perfectly fit, and though she wasn't too tall, her waist was tiny and her legs long.

A small smile curved her lips too, but it seemed forced to cover the nerves gripping her body, and it struck me as odd that she, too, was nervous about meeting me. The sight made me a bit more at ease since it made her seem more human.

She squeezed the hand he held, and they briefly turned to look at each other, her other palm landing on his chest when he briefly lowered his forehead to hers, giving her comfort.

The sight of them like that immediately merged with an image I'd already seen. The portrait in D's office. Except, the couple across from me was no longer filled with sorrow, only happiness.

They both remained quiet while I observed them, sensing I needed a moment to take it all in.

"I'm sorry, Natasha is nervous too," Isis explained to them. "Unfortunately, because of everything that has happened, I still haven't been able to tell her the truth."

The couple tensed a bit with the news, but the handsome man smiled at me, offering us a gentle nod. "That's okay, we'll have nothing but time now to get to know each other."

"On that note." Isis held my elbow, guiding me a few steps closer to them.

"Natasha, I want you to meet Dresden Von Reinheit, *Supreme Alpha* of the *North American ReinheitWölfe Pack*, and his wife Anastasia Roşu, *Viscountess* of the *North American Vampiri Clan*..."

Taking a deep breath, Isis glanced at me, her eyes glistening.

"... Your parents."

The sound of the teacup shattering into a thousand pieces echoed in the air as my heart stopped beating.

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*To be Continued...*

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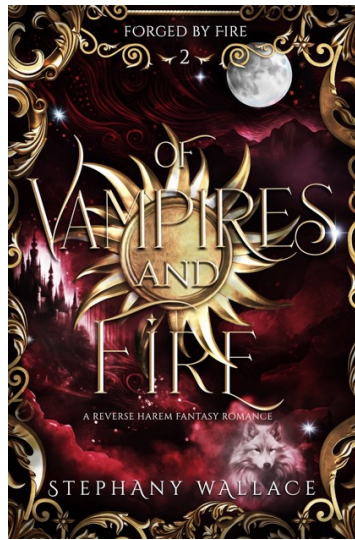
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### **A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR**

Thank you so much for reading *Of Wolves and Deceit*, Forged by Fire Series, Book 1. A Reverse Harem Fantasy Romance.

If you have enjoyed reading Natasha's story, please leave a review. It only takes few minutes to tell other readers what you enjoyed about the book!

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## PLAYLISTS

Music has always been a huge part of my inspiration for characters, scenes, and sometimes the entire story. These are the songs that inspired me through this journey and helped me form Natasha & Dante's story. I hope you love them and that they bring the story alive for you as they did for me. <3

### Natasha's Playlist

- Anyone. Demi Lovato
- Deserve This. Maggie Miles
- Lose you to Love Me. Selena Gomez
- It's OK. Frida Sundemo
- Be Me. VINCINT
- Obsessed. Addison Rae

[\*Listen now!\*](#)

### Dante's Playlist

- The Dark of You. Breaking Benjamin
- Arcade. Duncan Lawrence (To Corelia)
- Can I be him. James Arthur
- Dusk till Dawn. Zayn, Sia
- Rescue. Lauren Daigle
- My Universe. BTS and Coldplay

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## Dante & Natasha's Playlist

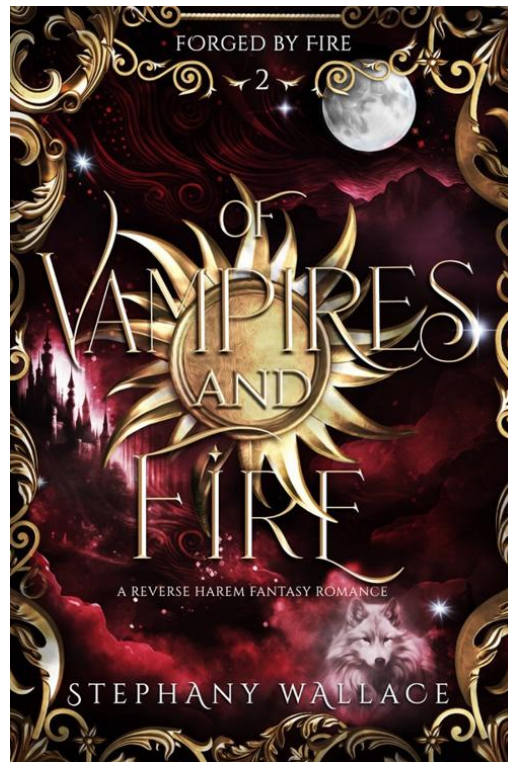
- Dusk till Dawn. Zayn, Sia
- Can I be him. James Arthur
- Rescue. Lauren Daigle
- Run to You. Lea Michele
- I will Follow you into the Dark. Jasmine Thompson
- Maybe. James Arthur
- Other Side. Aloe Blacc

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Forged by Fire Series, book 2

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My old life was a ploy to degrade me, manipulate me, and control me... or perhaps, to repress the creature my uncle feared I could become.

As the dust of my shattered world settles, I'm confronted with a truth I never thought possible—finding a family in the very

beings I wanted to destroy, Vampires. While I struggle to accept this reality, we attempt to find a way for me to shift into my wolf. Except, with my true nature uncovered, I'm unsure of what the shift will bring.

Through it all, Dante's love is my strength, still, I can no longer deny the devastating pull D has on me, as well as my wolf's demands to claim him as our mate too.

*I know my Lord of Twilight, D, and Hannes will keep me safe from danger, no matter the cost. Yet, when secrets and betrayal disrupt the castle, I'm thrust into a dangerous storm. Can anyone save me when I'm the one thing that can destroy them all?*

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephany Wallace is an International Bestselling Author of Steamy Paranormal and Fantasy Romance. She has multiple bestselling series including The Ancient Magic Series, The Curse of the Lycan, The Rise of the Dragon Master, and more.

Stephany writes about headstrong, quirky, or bad-ass heroines, and their swoon-worthy, alpha male, sweet, or sexy nerdy heroes. She loves creating stories about Vampires, Dragons, Wolf Shifters, and Witches, and immersing the reader in incredibly vivid worlds that capture you from the start, and drag you into her universe of magic and one-in-a-lifetime romance.

She's also a HUGE Star Wars and Disney nerd. May the Force Be with You! Did I mention she loves coffee?

Steph has many more adventures to embark on, so make sure you join her in her magical journey.

*Stay tuned!*

*You can stalk her, I mean follow her here, to know a bit more about her and her upcoming books:*

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