



BALANCING THE SCALES

OLD SECRETS

BOOK THREE



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

R . J . B L A I N

OLD SECRETS

Balancing the Scales

Book 3

R.J. BLAIN



OLD SECRETS
BALANCING THE SCALES BOOK THREE
BY R.J. BLAIN



Karma and Jake return in this thrilling conclusion to the Balancing the Scales trilogy.

Unable to find new leads on the terrorist organization they hunt, Karma and Jake set off to the one place they might find answers: Tibet. But something lurks on the horizon—something dark and dangerous enough that the United States, China, and Japan join forces to put an end to it.

While Karma wasn't the first to be betrayed and terrorized, she vows to make certain she is the last—no matter what the cost.



Copyright © 2023 by R.J. Blain

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Cover design by Rebecca Frank of Bewitching Book Covers.

Contents

1. The work might win at the rate it insisted on piling up.
 2. “Progress is progress.”
 3. “I like presents, so I am sure it’ll be fine.”
 4. “Our hosts find us to be funny.”
 5. “I don’t know what I’m hopeful for.”
 6. “Do you need some time alone with your new friend?”
 7. Many wanted to offer thanks.
 8. “Have I smelled this bad the whole time?”
 9. “My ma turned out to be as much of a monster as them.”
 10. Forgiveness only mattered if it helped me heal.
 11. “You could have stopped me at any time.”
 12. I enjoyed bashing heads together as needed.
 13. Moving forward, things would be better.
 14. “I owe you a debt.”
 15. “Those bastards killed kids on purpose, didn’t they?”
 16. “Eat out of my hand, little vixen.”
 17. My fox wanted blood.
 18. “How’d they get past security?”
 19. “Those who like being worshipped are crazy.”
 20. The witch often saw things I wished she wouldn’t.
 21. She didn’t need to witness more death.
- Epilogue: “Your Eminence, why shouldn’t I kill you for this?”

About the Author

ONE



The work might win at the rate it insisted on
piling up.

A MOUNTAIN OF PAPERWORK, some dating twenty to thirty years before my birth, took over the RV's table and threatened to spill to the floor. An amused Jake lounged on the couch and observed me face off against my foe. In his effort to combat the scorching heat and humidity of a Georgia summer, he'd removed his shirt. A rather enticing gleam of sweat proved difficult for me to ignore. If I wanted to get down to the bottom of the crime group after my dead head and why, I had to conquer the pages in front of me.

I needed to stop delaying my work to enjoy Jake and his bare chest.

The work might win at the rate it insisted on piling up.

Some were my adoption records, most of which had been flagged as forged. It'd taken the Inquisition and the black market working together to learn that very little of my documented life was real. The Inquisition suspected a kidnapping. The black market agreed, but they gave the idea of me being kidnapped as a baby a rather strange twist.

They suspected someone had taken me in an effort to hide me, likely from those behind the Greenwich case. Everyone associated with the files had died, and there was no information on my biological family. Nobody knew anything, not in China nor Tibet.

I questioned why everyone believed those behind the Greenwich case might want an infant from Tibet—or more accurately, why they might want

something from my Tibetan parents.

I also questioned why I appeared to be American rather than Tibetan. My DNA didn't lie, however.

There was nothing American about me.

Someone of good standing with China had inquired, and upon learning the background of the situation, China had given the Inquisition everything they knew about my situation.

On paper, I existed. My family did not. According to officials in China and Tibet, the town associated with my place of birth had been wiped out due to a natural disaster ten years before I'd been supposedly born, which had revealed my documents were a clever forgery.

My supposed birthplace's remote location had helped with the trick, but it had been a trick all the same, one designed to get me safely into the United States, where I'd been granted citizenship as an infant.

The United States, upon learning of the forgery and with a little prodding from the Inquisition, had issued me a new birth certificate and natural citizenship. China offered the same.

Both nations had opted to maintain the names on the original form at my request.

As long as my parents had names on a sheet of paper, they existed somewhere. I'd been given a promise that if I found out they had different names, I could change my official records to match—if I wanted.

The fox in me wanted to scream over yet another abandonment. I withheld judgment. The Inquisition and the black market both made good points, and until I discovered the true story about my birth and life in the United States, I wouldn't judge my mother and father.

Instead, I would cling to the thin hope I had a chance to experience what it was like to have parents who truly cared about me and wanted me to thrive and live.

Pa had.

Ma hadn't.

The pile contained more about Ma's story, too—and what had driven her to murder her baby and go on to try to kill me. Each fragmented piece of the puzzle added to my heartache. When everything came together, I feared the final story, one that told a tragedy of a father who'd suspected but couldn't prove the fate of his child and of a mother so obsessed with perfection and religious adherence she would slaughter her children to preserve her soul's sanctity.

I tried not to think about the matter of souls much. I couldn't imagine anywhere other than some dark and terrible hell for a woman who'd destroyed her family over an infant's illness and my refusal to become her version of perfection.

In a way, I resented that time did its work. I struggled to believe that last summer had slid into fall, we'd spent winter driving Mellisa and Amelia insane with our posturing, winter had faded to spring, and spring had once again bloomed into summer. According to Mellisa, we both had a way to go before either one of us counted as mentally and emotionally healthy, but I'd made good strides on the physical front.

Jake couldn't count my ribs anymore. He tended to act like he still walked on thin ice, which annoyed me. The realization I'd recovered faster than he did kept me quiet and patient.

I'd come to terms with my ma's betrayal in record time, focusing my efforts on learning about my past.

Jake struggled to find a balance between me, his future, and his parents, which slid further and further into the past category. The weekly calls had degraded to monthly, and it'd been three months since he'd considered initiating contact with his mother.

I gave it a few weeks before he decided to take the next step and find us a new pack, one where Mellisa and Amelia would enjoy unconditional welcome. In the year since we'd left from Baltimore, I'd grown more

sensitive to the work he did to protect the women from the brewing resentment within the pack.

I considered the paperwork, my husband, and the problem of the wolves he needed as much as I did. My fox had come to understand she could thrive with only Jake, and she sought out the comforting presence of his wolf often. She'd also learned to distrust certain wolves, although she adored others.

Jake's father may as well have hung the moon in her sky, second only to Jake. Jake's mother, on the other hand, reduced her to chitters of fury, which she sometimes expressed as screams of frustration in my head.

Some decisions were easier to make than others. Until we dealt with the past, how could we seek out a new and better future? I turned from the papers and regarded my husband and mate through narrowed eyes.

"I detect a certain amount of irritation from my wife," he stated, raising a brow. "Mellisa and Amelia won't be back for several hours. I'm sure that's enough time to crank the AC for a while and enjoy some quality time in bed."

The ploy, however tempting, wouldn't work on me. Not this time. "You can hold that thought until I have finished questioning you, Mr. Jake Thomas."

"What crime have I committed today?"

"None. Not yet. But I want a straight answer on why the pack has become, if anything, more hostile since we left. Either you're slipping or I'm improving at reading the pack bonds, but you're protecting Mellisa and Amelia from a lot of bullshit. You're also dodging calling your mother."

"I'm sneaking phone calls with my father," he confessed.

Oh. "I guess that makes two of us, then."

We stared at each other, blinking as we thought through the ramifications of us having independently communicated with Jake's father. It made some things easier for me to handle, though.

If he was talking to his father and things were still such a mess, there'd be no easy reconciliation. I could work with a challenge, but had his family

ventured over the brink to the land of no return?

No. Everyone still lived.

“All right. What is the actual problem with you and your mother?”

“Puppies,” Jake announced.

My eyes widened. Over the winter, we’d discovered I ticked like a Fenerec, and it took Jake work to convert me from infertile to a raging ball of hormones determined to have one or more children. In what would become a rather rough challenge for us, the more docile I behaved, the better the luck Jake had in inducing my fertility. Docility meant I struggled to nip him at all, as I tended to want to nuzzle more than put my teeth to work.

There would be no unexpected children for us, something I both appreciated and regretted.

“I don’t see the problem,” I admitted.

“She doesn’t have at least two grandchildren yet. She wants grandchildren. She’s annoyed I haven’t called her with a progress report on when she’s having grandchildren. I slipped on the last call,” he admitted.

I slapped my hand to my forehead. “All this fuss is over children you told her we wouldn’t be having until after we figured out when I went from the equivalent of a Fenerec’s puppy stage to a fully fledged adult of my species?”

“I mean, I’m fairly sure you zipped right through your puppy stage. You haven’t grown an inch as a fox, you’ve filled out, and your hormones are stabilized, although I’m puzzled because you seem like you’re still in season. All I have to do to make you fertile right now is give you a shoulder rub as part of our foreplay.”

I shrugged. “I like shoulder rubs.”

“You melt into a pliable puddle, Karma. You not only melt, but you use your saddest eyes on me if I don’t hurry up and get the show on the road. Then you lure me into doing all the work because you’re beautiful and use those sad eyes on me ruthlessly.”

I laughed because it was true. “It’s your fault. You showed me how good

of a time I have when I behave. But if you want some romps, I'll try to figure something out." In a way, I'd gone from one extreme to another, skating from accepted levels of violence to alarming levels of submissiveness. I assumed it had something to do with my species. "Are you telling me all this drama is because we haven't had children yet?"

"Basically."

"I'm surrounded by idiots."

He grinned. "You're sensing my mother's frustration, which is tripping Mason's trigger, which is annoying my father. The pack is perfectly happy having a fox, but my mother has gone from interfering in the wrong way to trying a little too hard on other fronts. She knows I'm avoiding the conversation. And anyway, I haven't completely dodged her. I'm dodging talking to her when you might catch me, because I don't want you pressured into feeling like everyone wants you to have kids."

"And here I was convinced this would be a nightmare to resolve, nothing was going right, and so on. Do I have to call your mother myself?"

"Please don't. She'll ask when we're having kids."

"And I will tell her that we will have kids when I learn how to use my teeth, as I went from being a biting psychopath to a melty puddle of nuzzling affection. If I could make my teeth work rather than just trying to nuzzle you to a near-death state, we'd probably have a kid with another on the way by now."

Jake chuckled. "The Inquisition doesn't let pregnant women do any field work after the first trimester, but packs love watching the kids of successful operatives."

That was good to know. In the time since leaving Baltimore, we'd hunted information more than people, and I'd found the chase for knowledge to be appealing. "It's been a year, and we've actually made some twisted form of progress on the Greenwich case—in that the group has gone underground. Them going underground means they aren't snatching kids or trying to kill

people, myself included. But why?”

“Honestly, I’ve been concerned they’re waiting to snatch our victory out of our hands at the last possible moment. Why do the work when we’re doing the work for them?” Jake huffed. “The latest batch of paperwork concerns me, though.”

“The table hasn’t collapsed yet. I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

“That’s only half of the paperwork. I was told we were getting the first half of the paperwork this morning and that the second half would arrive this evening.”

The table wouldn’t survive twice as much paperwork. “We have a few chairs we can store it on until we do our first pass and hand it off for Amelia to see if she can spot something we’ve missed. And then because Mellisa gets bored, she’ll have a turn with it, too.” In some ways, I worried for Mellisa, who had a chat with us every few days and gave us lists of things to do to improve our relationship.

In my case, it boiled down to nuzzle less and bite more. Jake tended to have multi-hour sessions, most of which I refused to ask about. I considered my unwillingness to ask, and as I wanted to dodge the paperwork for a few more minutes, I asked, “Am I why your therapy takes so long?”

Jake shook his head. “My therapy takes so long because I’m a mess. You were a mess, but you went through the stages of general grief in record time. Mellisa is worried you went through it too quickly. I think you decided to refuse to be miserable over something you hadn’t been responsible for and moved forward. I’m having a harder time because I’m still trying to piece together how so much went so wrong so quickly. I’m also stubborn; I keep trying to concoct a thousand and one ways I’d screwed everything up. I refuse to acknowledge or accept you played a part as well.”

I raised a brow. “Well, I did. Once I learned more about my fox and she learned more about packs and wolves, I understood I didn’t need the pack. I needed the bond with you. My fox will be heartbroken if you take your father

away, though. She adores him.”

“My father is sneaky.”

“He’s a lot like you, really.” I engaged my husband in a staring contest. “I’ve been sitting here freaking out that your family was still falling apart, and you’re just worried your mother is going to pressure me about children?”

“Basically.”

“Tell her we’ll work on kids after the Greenwich case is closed. If she wants to be a one-woman army, point her at the problem. That way, the problem disappears, and then we can worry about my inability to make use of my teeth once you’ve given me any positive attention.”

Jake chuckled. “Or I can pretend I’m not interested while accepting your advances, which is when you do tend to use your teeth, and I will continue to do so until you have sufficiently made use of your teeth. This is not a difficult problem to solve, especially if you put me into cuffs and do whatever you want with me for a few hours.”

“Eight, according to Mellisa. Eight hours.” I considered his offer. “That, however, does sound like a great time for me. I’m selfish like that. Then I’d get an even better time, as all you have to do to turn me into a pliable puddle is exist.”

“The problem isn’t a problem. I just have to restrain myself and give you the leash, and once you’ve had your fun, it’s my turn to have fun. We could test to see how quickly you change my fertility state. For science.” Then, knowing it would reduce me to giggles, Jake leered at me.

Sure enough, I broke down laughing. “For science, is it?”

“We need to extensively study this, of course. Are fox teeth magical and capable of inducing male Fenerec fertility at a brisk rate? There are some rumors that an eager female Fenerec can induce fertility in her male faster than eight hours. That’s just the average. You’re already well ahead of the Fenerec curve. We’re in summer, and all I need to do to make you fertile is give you a look and instigate. Your winter season is insanity. Once you

became fertile, you were ready to rumble the entire time. Just judging from your behavior, I suspect your species has the female induce male fertility first, and then he needs to induce on the female—if she accepts him. You were very talkative with your teeth early in our relationship, but since you decided to be docile, I can do whatever I want with you. I suspect I'll have to play hard to get until you induce my fertility, and then I get to have my way with you. It's not that much different from what Fenerec do, just with a twist. And additional risk, because you might be fertile until you become pregnant. Then we have no idea when you'll become fertile again. Mellisa mentioned some concern that if you are like that, you might have health consequences if you don't have a pregnancy."

I eyed my husband and his sweaty chest. "Please elaborate."

"You haven't had a period since winter, Karma."

Damn. I forgot Fenerec had sensitive noses and could detect when I was having my period. "I assumed it was normal because I feel fine."

"According to scent, you've been about ten minutes from ovulation since the first week of winter. Honestly, the scent is driving me absolutely insane. Amelia laughs every time she sees me now. I'm at the point I want to drag you to Tibet to check out this town and the nearby mountains to see if there is a hidden colony of foxes there. However much I'm concerned about those behind the Greenwich case, I'm more worried about your health. We just don't know if this extended fertility period will hurt you. And we don't even know how long a pregnancy would last."

Right. Mellisa had dragged me to an Inquisition clinic at the end of the winter for an MRI, ultrasounds, and every other test she could book for me. Whatever I was, I wasn't human. Humans had two ovaries. I had four. Not only did I have four ovaries, Mellisa had discovered I had an extra set of tubes connecting my extra ovaries together, along with additional tubes leading into my uterus. To complicate matters, I had an odd hip conformity compared to most women.

Despite my small size, Mellisa suspected I'd have an easier time giving birth to children, and the placement of several key organs implied I was better designed than most women to have multiple children at a time.

The saddest of the discoveries had been found along my side. While absorbing deceased twins happened in humans, my twin had been a tiny fox, her bones no more than two and a half inches long, late enough in development to be identifiable. At a loss for what to do, we'd removed her and given her a burial. At the Inquisition's recommendation, we'd buried her in such a way we could retrieve her tiny body and take her back to Tibet in case we found our parents.

"We don't even know if I can shapeshift while pregnant."

Jake nodded. "Ultimately, we need to go to Tibet and see if we can find your parents. I don't want us to lose a child because we just don't know what steps we need to take. Ferenc can't shapeshift during a pregnancy, but we don't know about your species. Your body was built for shapeshifting. You don't experience hardly any of our complications, you're faster at it, and now that you're practiced, it doesn't even bother you."

"It hasn't hurt to shift since winter." That had made Jake panic, especially when he forgot that two to five seconds was my normal after I'd learned to shift on my own. I did the equivalent of pop between forms. If anything, shifting served as an antidepressant, too. "You seduced better shapeshifting into me."

While he rolled his eyes, he did laugh. "I'm hopeful I can seduce something a little more special than shapeshifting into you once we get this mess sorted out."

Between the two of us, we were so driven to have kids we'd have fights over who worked versus stayed home. Working the black market would help us both, as we'd only have to handle a few jobs a year to sustain a good lifestyle for us and any children we might have.

But Jake was right.

We needed to sort the Greenwich mess out first.

That left the pile of paperwork on the table. “Then let’s get to work. While I do my first pass of this nightmare, you go pester someone in the Inquisition. We need tickets to Tibet, somewhere to park our RVs, and a translator and tour guide. If the Greenwich case is older than I am, then we need to go to the very beginning.”

“We’ll find the truth,” Jake promised. “But first, could I entice you into practicing the seductive use of your teeth? I feel this is an important scientific experiment we should conduct while our nosy neighbors aren’t home.”

As the nosy neighbors would inevitably come over to help once we started working, I headed for the air conditioner, turned the temp down, and skipped to our bed. “I’m not convinced you ever left rut after winter. I’m just saying I can last an entire day without using my saddest eyes on you.”

“Why would I want to?”

The man had a point. “I really don’t know,” I admitted.

“We can talk about it after I resist your feminine charms for a minimum of fifty good nips.”

How ruthless. “Fifty? Why fifty? I can barely handle one.”

“Well, after fifty, you’ll get exactly what you want, probably rougher than I prefer but that you love—and our neighbors will come home to discover we skipped out on work. I don’t know about you, but I could use a good nap.”

If I managed to nip him properly two or three times, I’d drive him crazy enough we’d both need a good nap to be able to function again. What would happen if I nipped him fifty times? “I feel like we’re playing with fire, Jake.”

“Oh, we are. Desperate times call for desperate measures. But after I’ve been successfully tamed, I’ll get to work scheduling our trip to Tibet while you defeat the new paperwork.”

“That sounds like a plan.”

TWO



“Progress is progress.”

NOTHING REVVED my engine quite like Jake resisting my advances, and we quickly determined the more submissively he behaved around me, the better I got at using my teeth in a rather provocative fashion. We didn't reach fifty nips or nibbles, as after five, Jake announced I had the right idea, pounced, and enjoyed the rather lengthy battle to have his chance to do whatever he wanted with me.

Foxes couldn't purr, but I tried.

Rather than conquer the paperwork, we hibernated in bed until a rather amused Amelia woke us the next morning, pounding on our door until we got out of bed. She came armed with coffee, which we both needed to become functional enough to make our own pot.

While we attempted to wake up, Amelia poked at the stack of documentation we needed to sort. “Honestly, after seeing this, I don't blame you two for pushing it off. I would have, too. As you two were conked out when the delivery arrived, it's in my RV. Seeing this mess, I'll start my share of the work on the second pile with Mellisa. That should keep us busy. Any new jobs?”

With the morning ritual underway, I left Jake to handle the lack of a new job issue while I hunted for something to wear that wasn't a bathrobe. Once dressed in a t-shirt and a pair of worn jeans, I went into the kitchen to begin

the tedious work of appeasing our voracious ways.

“We’ve come to the conclusion it’s time to head to Tibet. Not just to search into why the Greenwich operators want Karma but to find out more about her biology. She’s still deep in her season, and I don’t know if she’ll stay that way until we have kids, if it’s healthy, or anything. We have figured out how to get her nipping appropriately, though.”

“Progress is progress,” Amelia announced, and she applauded my effort to actually use my teeth on my husband. “Honestly, it’s a novelty. She’s the exact opposite of Fenerec in many ways but just like us in others. Did you have to play at being docile to get her nipping?”

“Yep. The more docile I behaved, the more insistently she nipped. It’ll take more than a little work, but we’re not going to push our luck until we can find out more. Especially after what we learned from the ultrasound.”

The discovery of my lost twin had changed everything—especially as the tiny bones had showed no signs of damage from shapeshifting, not like a Fenerec’s child did if the mother shapeshifted during her pregnancy. “I mean, the extra ovaries are flat-out weird.”

“Oh. That reminds me. Mellisa asked me to be the bearer of strange news.”

I raised a brow, dug out bacon from the fridge, and as strange news often unsettled me, I grabbed a pair of steaks and eggs so we could eat our anxiety away. “I’m ready.”

“Remember how they asked if they could retrieve an egg sample?”

“You mean four egg samples, one from each ovary. Yes. Jake freaked. They did it during the procedure to remove my twin. I mean, having four ovaries is weird, so how does it get weirder?”

“Two of the ovaries, like humans, are for egg storage. Two are for egg development. In short, unlike humans, you are not born with your final egg supply. You’re constantly regenerating eggs. Your eggs are also inclined to split at their whim, so it’s highly probable your species carries litters.”

Amelia winced. “They also went ahead with the questionable test.”

Jake had disliked the idea of the test as had I, but to confirm if a Fenerec and a fox were compatible, the Inquisition had inquired with a mated pair if they would provide fertile sperm sufficient to test our base compatibility. The first test would result in the fertilized egg being lost, but it would help prepare us for the reality of becoming parents—if we could become parents. At most, the test would last until a sample could be taken and analyzed. In living fetuses, the test was done at seven weeks. Experimental science had allowed the medical staff to perform the tests between seven to ten days. “And?”

“The cell development is roughly a third slower than in humans but appeared otherwise normal. Your eggs are viable and compatible with Fenerec sperm. The slow cell development puzzled them, but the cells look robust. From what the witches and tests can tell, the cells favored Karma’s genetics, but evidence of Fenerec-born genetics were present. So, be warned. You will have litters. Literal litters. They suspect Karma’s mother shapeshifted with her often.”

“Because of my twin?”

“In part.” Amelia shrugged. “The news gets stranger.”

“How could it get stranger?” I blurted.

“Your DNA results are in, too. They did a comparative against human DNA, Fenerec DNA, and yours. Then, upon seeing some odd results, they began digging deeper. Your origin is probably the result, but they suspect you have very limited genetic diversity.”

I had limited genetic diversity? “Like cheetahs, where all but a few individuals died out and they inbred for survival?”

“Not to the same severe degree, but close. I got a whole lecture about genetic diversity, but it boiled down to a comment we should search for women who look exactly like Karma, men who are the masculine form of Karma, and go from there when we’re in Tibet. Mellisa is preparing us to get

out of here. The Inquisition wants us in Tibet yesterday due to the DNA testing results, especially with them understanding you both want to pursue having puppies. Or kits. The risk of an entire litter of them is very present, especially considering Karma's biological differences compared to humans."

In a pause in making breakfast, I laughed and gave my hip a pat. "I'm better designed for kids."

"And you're so hardwired to have them that I'm surprised you let Jake out of your bedroom."

Jake laughed. "I don't mind."

"I'm sure you don't." Amelia snorted, shook her head, and headed for the door. "We're to take the paperwork with us, and we'll have a chartered flight to the region. The Inquisition is acquiring our guide and translator as we speak, and we expect to leave for China the day after tomorrow."

"That soon?" I stared at the Fenerec with wide eyes. "Jake and I were talking about pushing for Tibet yesterday, but we'd been told it could take weeks to get the guide and translator."

"They talked with China, China agreed, and so we're heading off the day after tomorrow. Mellisa is handling her business and getting more information on the lab tests. Also, the pair who helped with the test are having a pup, and they got first crack at going over to the west coast to get help with the pregnancy. So, while none of us particularly liked the test, good did come out of it. Per your request, the egg, once confirmed to be deceased, was buried along with your twin."

"Thank you."

"You're the exact opposite of that monster who dared to call herself your ma. Don't forget that. Although I doubt you will, not with how you behave around kids. Unlike her, you don't want the perfect family image. You want a family. You'll be fine. Just keep beating your mate until he gets it through his thick skull."

I glared at Jake out of the corner of my eye.

“According to my wife’s expression, I need to confess that I am still talking to my mother, but she’s pushing for puppies pretty hard, and I don’t want Karma to deal with that drama. The plans, Amelia. The plans. The last time I called, she was so hopeful we might try for twins. She doesn’t know about the testing.”

“I’m guessing twins are probable,” I replied, unable to keep the amusement out of my tone. “I will insist we raise only one litter at a time, even if it means we only get one litter.” We had no idea how long I would live, how long I could have kids for, or if my species was one and done before falling over dead like cuttlefish. “I don’t want to be like a cuttlefish,” I complained.

“What?” Jake blurted.

I heaved a sigh. “A female cuttlefish breeds once and then dies shortly after laying her eggs. I don’t want to be like a cuttlefish.”

Jake huffed, and after a moment, he dared to laugh at me. “I don’t want you to be like a cuttlefish, either. I really doubt you’re like a cuttlefish.”

Amelia grinned at me, halting at the door. “Well, that is why there is so much pressure to head to Tibet. The Greenwich case will be easier to solve if we can lure the bastards on to Chinese soil, too.”

“Oh?” I asked.

“The Chinese are offended by the group’s existence. We’ll have several packs of Chinese Fenerec keeping an eye out for the group. Assuming we come up dry on your parents, we’re going to create a news incident with you in China and run an operation to take the Greenwich group out.”

I bounced on my toes, making sure to keep a close eye on breakfast so I wouldn’t burn it. “I can be the bait?”

“You can be the bait, and there will be a lot of powerhouses around trying to make sure you and Jake emerge without a scratch. If we have a say in it, there won’t be another London.”

I winced at the mention of the London shooting, which had revealed my

ability to become a fox and had led to so much heartache. “We don’t talk about London.”

Jake snickered. “More accurately, we don’t talk about the insanity that is Karma on certain medications. Hey, babe?”

“What?”

“I didn’t die.”

Bastard. I flipped my middle finger at him.

“Perhaps after Amelia leaves, we have breakfast, and we at least look at some of this paperwork.”

Laughing, Amelia opened the door. “And on that note, I’ll leave you two to your activities. Is she still fertile at a single come-hither, Jake?”

“Yep. A single nip or caress is sufficient for her to be ready to rumble.”

A year ago, the talk would have bothered me, but after so long trying to figure out how I ticked, I discovered the discussion amused me more than anything. “I’m a very good fox,” I informed our friend in my most serious tone.

“We know,” she replied with laughter in her voice. “Believe me, we know.”



AWARE THAT EVERYTHING about my birth and identity might be a lie, I rummaged through the collection of paperwork in search of the truth. Everything after the age of six, which I could verify myself, went into one pile. Everything that lacked an associated memory went into another pile. The documents I doubted were real went into yet another pile, and everything prior to my supposed date of birth went into a final pile.

A medical record, one I hadn’t seen before and I suspected my ma had attempted to hide, indicated I’d always been behind the curve by a significant

margin. At age five, I'd been closer in size to a toddler, aged two at most. I'd put on a few extra inches here and there, until I'd somehow burst up to my current five nothing around age nineteen.

At the time, I'd been thrilled with the extra height.

Now I questioned everything about how I'd developed.

"Jake? Grab the measuring tape, would you?"

While he raised a brow, he went to our toolbox we kept stashed in our bedroom closet and returned with the measuring tape.

I stood my straightest and ordered, "Measure me." Then, realizing I'd married a pervert, I added, "My height, not my breasts."

"I don't need to measure your breasts to enjoy their general increase in size. You're going to spill out if you don't replace your bra soon."

Damn it. I'd done a rather good job of ignoring the need to go buy new bras. "Just measure me."

He chuckled and obeyed, and he took care to flatten his hand on the top of my head to keep my hair from contributing extra inches. "Five foot two inches."

"I'll be damned." I grabbed the medical record and thrust it at him. "Fenerec age quickly and then stall. Whatever race I am doesn't."

"And the preliminary information we have implies you're a long-lived species like us. What made you want to check your height?" Jake eyed the papers I'd given him, and a moment later, he said, "I see."

"How old am I? The medical records imply I came to the United States as a newborn, but the evidence is implying I wasn't really a newborn—not in the human sense of the word. At five, they think I was closer in physical size to a two year old, Jake."

"I never actually monitored your height. The FBI never really checks height after the intake exam, either. I've been checked at the doctor's office sometimes, but it's not something I've ever paid attention to. Two inches at our height difference isn't all that much."

I stared at the general vicinity of his chest. “That’s an understatement. I mean, I do like the general view at this level, but it would be nice to look at your face now and then.”

Jake picked me up. As always, I squeaked, latched on to him so he wouldn’t drop me, and scowled at having been given precisely what I’d asked for. “Are you sure I’m a fox? I might be a koala instead.”

Laughing, he gave me a kiss, and rather than make me cling to him, he dislodged me and set me back on the floor. “You’re cuter than the average koala, so I’m pretty sure you are a fox. Exposure has worked. You still cling, but you don’t shriek like I’m about to kill you now.”

“Maybe I was dumped in the United States because Tibet has many tall places. My fear of heights is so bad they couldn’t keep me where there are tall mountains.”

“Or something happened when you were a baby and you’re now terrified of heights as a result.”

“Wouldn’t I remember that?”

He shrugged. “I’d go ask the resident expert on the subject, but the last time I went over there, she almost took my head off with her travel bag. It’s not safe to go to her RV right now.”

“It would suck if you were killed by our therapist. We’re almost functional people, and it would be a pity if we undid her work bothering her while she’s packing.” I eyed the paperwork. “We should be packing.”

“I threw some clothes into a suitcase for us. I figure the Chinese can help us with clothing if we need.”

“Do they actually sell clothing for giants in China?”

Jake frowned. “If not, well, I’ll be wearing four pairs of jeans and a suit for the duration of the trip.”

“You better bring a second suit.”

“But why?”

“One so you can look nice for them, one so you can look nice for me.” I

stared into his eyes. “Isn’t my happiness important?”

“The first thing I’m doing, should I meet anyone of your species, is to ask how I can turn you off for like five whole minutes. Just five. You look at me like that, and I realize if I don’t give you affection before we leave, you might destroy the plane before we make it to China. You’ll go crazy before we land.”

I considered his words, shrugged, and realized I had issues. “Well, we do have a therapist for a reason. I should have her prescribe you as part of my healthcare plan.”

Jake held up a finger, opened his mouth, narrowed his eyes, and turned his attention to the door. “I’m going to risk my life to ask the therapist if this is a possibility. I’ll also find out what time we must leave, warn her we need to make sure you’re not going to become a psychopath on the flight, and eat enough to tide us over if we don’t get any meals until we’re in China.”

“Look at you, being all sensible over there.” I grinned and returned to the paperwork determined to vex me. “Report my updated height to her, ask her how the hell I didn’t notice two new inches, and inquire how long I’ll be a hormonal mess for.”

“Honestly, I like your current state as a hormonal mess. No cramps, no period, you’re exceptionally easy to please, and you’re even easier to entice into being pleased. Even better, I’ve figured out how to bring out the feisty vixen I have to handcuff if I want to avoid bleeding. This situation is to my liking, and I’d rather not change much. Unless we’re adding puppies to the mix, in which case I’m game for that.”

“You are such a pervert, Jake.”

“You’re the reason I’m a pervert.”

I rolled my eyes and gestured at the door. “I might even be sad if our therapist kills you. Leave. I’m trying to find important documentation. I want to put the critical reading in my bag so I can investigate it on the plane.”

“I’ll ask all the important health questions that will likely result in my

general survival. But if you were aged five but the medical reports say you were two, then I would look at the three years prior to your adoption date as closer to your birthdate. That seems to be a reasonable time frame. Also check for big news coming out of China or that we think may be associated with the Greenwich case. What sort of important tech was being developed at that time? What sensitive diplomatic matters were going on? Make use of the Inquisition number they gave you and ask them about the timing. It could be that your family is of importance to someone in China, possibly in the Inquisition. See if you can get Richard Murphy involved.”

“Richard Murphy?”

“Yellowknife’s Alpha. He has close ties with the Chinese, and I bet he’s the one who fast-tracked our trip to Tibet. If we get lucky, we might get his father-in-law.”

“Who is that?”

“Charles Desmond. He’s an Inquisition operative and enforcer. Actually, you need to learn about him anyway, so give your Inquisition contact a call and see if you can get Desmond on the phone. I haven’t dealt with him directly, but he showed up in Vegas a time or two while I was out there. He’s aware I exist, but not much more than that. I hope. He’d kick my ass in a fight, and I don’t want my ass kicked by anyone other than you.”

His hopeful tone amused me into snorting at him. “I’ll call, you go talk to Mellisa. Remind her I actually want you alive right now. You’re useful. And as more than a toy to take to bed.”

“But I like being a toy you take to bed.”

I bet he did. “Shoo, shoo. Once you’re back, you can make us dinner and prepare to be dessert.”

“How does steak sound?”

“Steak with a side of Jake sounds good to me.” As the papers would win if I didn’t get a move on, I resumed sorting, attacking the pile I’d identified as dated before my presumed birth in search of a clue to who I was, why I was

important to those behind the Greenwich case, and what they knew that we didn't.



MY INQUISITION CONTACT worried for my life, but he called Charles Desmond, and within ten minutes, he gave me a number to call. Before I lost my nerve, as few men worried Jake, I dialed, pinned the phone between my ear and shoulder, and resumed my hunt for anything that might prove of use in my search for my identity.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Thomas,” a man answered in a friendly tone. “I have heard interesting things about you.”

“Was it the part about being the tiniest psychopath along the east coast, that I’m a fox, or the highlighting and the underlining?”

“A bit of all three, actually. My contact didn’t say much, just that you require some assistance with a matter involving the Chinese?”

“Yes. My records state I was born in Tibet, but a lot has been proven to be falsified. It’s probable I was actually born in Tibet, which is why we’re heading there, but Jake thought it might be prudent to ask someone about large-scale events involving the Inquisition, China, and potential crime groups up to five years prior to my claimed birth. Judging from my medical records, we think my species develops slower than regular humans.”

“Which would put you at significantly slower aging than Fenerec.”

“Well, I’ve added two inches of height, and I’m in my early thirties—and I know I was five foot nothing at twenty-three when I joined the FBI and went through their first major physical. We didn’t track my height thereafter, but I suspect the new inches are rather recent.”

“A late adolescence growth spurt,” Charles Desmond murmured. “Fenerec mature early; by the time our puppies are fifteen, they’re the

equivalent of fully matured humans, mentally, physically, and emotionally. Where you, as you say, were the equivalent of a rowdy teen in your late twenties.”

His refusal to call me the tiniest psychopath along the east coast amused me. “I’m coming to that conclusion as well. Jake seems to think I’ve settled out. In that I’m no longer adding on inches and pounds as a fox.”

“You still probably have some growing to do as a human. My Nicolina was much the same; she was well ahead of the curve for Fenerec, and she’s over the moon that she’s added some height since she mated with Richard. We tend to develop significantly faster in our wolf form. Of course, she’s only added a half an inch, but that half an inch may as well be a crowning achievement of her life. Unfortunately for her, Richard also put on about half an inch, and he remains a rather diminutive Alpha. If you need some help with China, that’s something I can do. If I don’t have access to the incidents involving Inquisition members from the time period and location you need, Richard does. Is this number good to contact?”

“Yes, sir, it is.” I explained the situation, the medical records I’d found, and the current problems and concerns involving my general health. “Jake’s hopeful I’m not actually like a cuttlefish, but I’m not convinced.”

The man chuckled. “There has been plenty of evidence among Fenerec that Fenerec women can enter a similar state if her mate instigates ongoing evening activities without becoming fertile. However, our women don’t stop having their regular menstrual cycles when human, nor do they have extra organs and build like you do. What I can do is inquire with the Chinese if they have had any unusual autopsies. That might get us a hit. Four ovaries would stand out, as would the oversized uterus and hip differences. That’s good intel to have. The rest of your organs seem normal?”

“As far as I know,” I replied. I continued to rummage through the documents, pausing at a police report of violence at an airport where there were several incoming flights from China. I set those aside to be investigated

further during the flight. “We’re concerned about whether or not I can shapeshift during a pregnancy.”

“Or if it’s mandatory for you and the developing child.”

“Children. It does not seem like I’m built for having one at a time. And we also don’t know if I have a weird fertility cycle.”

“May my daughters never find out I have discussed their periods with anyone, but they started at a rather normal age for human women.”

“I had my first period at age ten. Well, at what I thought was age ten.”

“That would be a normal average, so you share some biological traits with humans despite your variances. It could be that your true nature was suppressed and you were functioning mostly as a human. Now that you’re shapeshifting as nature intended for you to do, your body is adapting back to what should be your normal. I could see that happening. I’ll do some digging on my end and send you some texts with relevant information. When you’re in China, inquire with your Chinese contact for the best method of contacting me. They’ll likely provide you with a specially tracked phone. I’ll make some calls and get back to you. When are you leaving?”

“At some offensive hour in the middle of the night.”

“They must have called in a charter, then. Which airport?”

“Atlanta.”

“May you rest in peace should you not survive that airport,” he quipped.

I giggled at the airport’s reputation for being a madhouse. “Thank you for your help. It’s really appreciated.”

“I’m glad to help. I’ll text you with my daughter’s number. While your circumstances aren’t quite the same, I’m sure you can find common ground. From my understanding, you’re rather eager to look into the problem of you having children?”

“Assuming I’m not like a cuttlefish.”

He snickered. “If you could help impress upon my daughter she need not be perfect before becoming a mother, I’d appreciate it.”

Ah. “Well, I mean, if she isn’t the kind to kill her infant because he’s not perfect, she’s more qualified than my adoptive mother, that’s for certain.”

“That insight is part of why I’m grateful you had reason to reach out to me. I’m concerned it might result in her and Richard adopting an entire pack of children, but she’s just like me.”

I could make a few guesses by what he meant by that. “You’re wired to have children around?”

“Precisely.”

“No matter how poorly adoption worked out for me in the long run, I highly encourage you look into it.”

“You’re not bitter over your experience?”

I allowed myself a smile, pausing in my search of the papers to say, “My ma made poor choices, but I am who I am now because of the things she did. All the things she did. Don’t get me wrong. She is what I view to be an ultimate evil. She murdered her son because he had been born with complications. He needed love and medical care. She beat him to death because he wasn’t perfect. She tried to kill me because I wasn’t perfect. Worse, I’d made all her sins known. My pa wasn’t innocent, either, but I recognize he had no proof. Therapy has helped. But I’ve decided I’ll be everything she was not. I don’t know if someone involved with the Inquisition can adopt, honestly. Will I be a perfect mother? Absolutely not. But I’ll be a present mother.”

“And that’s all you really and truly need to do to be a good parent. You need to be present and sensible, even when your children are insensible as children are prone to being. And your issues with your mate?”

“He’s still struggling, but I’ve figured my end of things out. He was patient for me, and I can be patient for him. He needs to figure out what a good balance between us and his family is.”

“I’ll do you a favor, Karma. I’ll go venture over to Baltimore, have a discussion with his parents about the situation, and take them out west for a

few days to see healthy packs and their relationships with their human and witch pack mates. Seeing will help more than the flailing I've been hearing about."

I giggled at the thought of the big bad wolf teaching Jake's parents their manners. "My fox adores Jake's father, and while she doesn't get along with his mother, I can understand why everything happened. That doesn't make it right, but there's no reason we can't all get along. Jake's having a harder time with that, too."

"You don't need or want overtures. You just want a safe haven," Desmond guessed. "Am I correct?"

"You're correct."

"And when you're a child, and everything has been turned upside down on you, not having a safe haven is terrifying. And not realizing you're likely still a child in the standards of your species after you've been told for a decade you're an adult only complicates the problem. And then the societal standards of what they consider adults versus children kicks in. That leads to some uncomfortable emotions. My daughter picked her Richard when she was fifteen. She'd matured earlier than I prefer, and she had fixated on him the moment he'd stepped through our door. In our terms, she was an adult capable of making her own choices. By humanity's standards, she was a child far too young to be making those decisions. You don't know what your family believes to be the appropriate age."

"We don't."

"If you are content with your situation and you have settled out and figured out what you both need, and you both still want it, I recommend you ignore what others say. And if it turns out your species waits to engage in matrimony at a later age, well, you were almost thirty in our eyes when you decided which male you wished to pursue."

The Inquisitor's tone implied Jake was just some male I'd picked up off the streets and had decided to keep around. "We both made mistakes, sir."

“Yes, you did. And admitting that is a good sign you both want to make the relationship last. I received a briefing on your situation, as you would have been transferred into my custody if the pack issues in Baltimore hadn’t been resolved. As it is, I’m considering bringing you both to Seattle so you can witness a healthy pack structure. Perhaps after your trip to Tibet. Should you become pregnant, I will probably request rights to help you through the pregnancy, depending on what we learn about your species. Seattle has the equipment for touchy pregnancies involving women who shouldn’t be treated in a general hospital.”

Ah. I understood. Jake had told me about the Fenerec women who sometimes gave birth to a wolf rather than a human infant. “Considering I had a twin removed who was a fox, that’s probably wise.”

“That discovery couldn’t have been pleasant for you.”

I considered his statement, and after a moment, I said, “It brought up a lot of questions we don’t have the answers to, which is why we’re going to Tibet. I’d rather not have to experiment to see what I can and can’t do should we have children.”

“That is not a battle any parent wants to fight. I’ll give my Chinese contacts a call and start asking about women who better match your personal physiology. In the meantime, try not to wear your male out too much. And should you become pregnant, well, we’ll do our best to get your little ones into the world with the understanding we may not be able to treat your pregnancy like we do Fenerec or human women. And Mrs. Thomas?”

“Yes, sir?”

“I am certain you are not like a cuttlefish, so do please try to hold on to your general sanity in that regard. Cuttlefish have a lifespan of two years. You have already surpassed them. The majority of your organs and habits are human with some differences. I’m sure you’re not going to spontaneously fall over dead post reproducing.”

I dissolved into a fit of giggles. “I’m still going to say it just to drive Jake

crazy.”

“As long as you’re only doing it to drive him crazy,” he conceded.

“But what if my species is like a cuttlefish? Or that we only reproduce once and that’s it?”

“Considering I was told on the phone before speaking to you that you are producing new eggs as an adult, I suspect you’re long-lived like the Fenerec and it wouldn’t surprise me if you maintain your fertility for a long time. Frankly, you should be more concerned about how to control the number of offspring you have.”

“But why would I want to?” I blurted.

That got the man chuckling. “I’m going to enjoy introducing you to Nicolina. Perhaps you can convince her she’s finally ready to be a mother.”

“Why don’t you give me her email address? I’ll send her an email, set her straight, and leave you to witness her head explode, as I will blame you for reaching out in the first place.”

After a long but amusing silence, he said, “I am looking forward to seeing what she will do more than is good for my health. If I find out anything from my Chinese contacts, I will text you and request a call when you’re able. Have a safe flight, watch your back, and if you see those Greenwich scum, stick to your strengths.”

“You mean rip them apart and paint with their blood?”

“Precisely.”

THREE



“I like presents, so I am sure it’ll be fine.”

AT THREE IN THE MORNING, we handed the keys to our truck and RV off to a pair of Inquisition operatives, and they drove us to the airport.

I’d expected a commercial flight.

What we got instead defied comprehension. The plane, which belonged to the Chinese government, used the same gates as commercial flights, but there was nothing commercial about it except its size. We entered a luxurious paradise, one where Jake and I had a suite to ourselves with four seats, a dining table, and a big bed we could enjoy at our leisure. According to the flight attendants, we would stop to refuel and check over the plane in Tokyo, where we would spend at least two days while a Chinese delegation finished some business in Japan. They would join us for the short flight to the nearest Chinese airport, after which the plane would take us closer to Tibet. According to the leather binder, which contained an itinerary, we would be visiting several heritage sites in Japan while the local Fenerec kept a close watch out and intercepted anyone who might be a part of the Greenwich operations.

For the next thirteen hours, we would be pampered, given sufficient time to enjoy ourselves in the suite’s privacy, and be fed.

To my amusement, China had sent over a pair of witches who worked with Fenerec to do a full health evaluation. One of them had a knack at

reading biological signatures and could accurately judge when a woman needed to halt transformations to protect her child.

It amused me we had a busy schedule on the plane. For the first hour after we hit altitude, we were expected to dine in the group dining hall in the center of the plane, where we would be showered with the best treats China had to offer. I questioned how they cooked on a plane, but the folder was clear.

Our treats would be fresh.

“This is amazing,” I informed Jake, waving the itinerary at him. “We got to bring all our work papers, they planned for us to have working hours, which is after we have sufficient cuddling time. They put cuddling time on this.”

“Fenerec require a great deal of affection, and we’ve been telling them you’re a hormonal mess,” my husband replied, smiling at me. He checked my seatbelt and loosened it. “Making that so tight you can barely breathe is not going to help in an emergency, Karma. You need to breathe. But I suspect you’ll be kept so busy on the flight that you won’t be worried about the fact we’re flying.”

I bobbed my head, rereading the itinerary for Japan. “Someone went through all this work so we could do something nice in Japan while waiting for the flight to China.”

“With a bonus of getting you out and about to see if Greenwich is spying on the Chinese and Japanese.”

“They promised we’d be armed, Jake.” I pointed at the appropriate line on the itinerary. “And there is a time listed when we will receive gifts?”

“I don’t understand that part of things,” he admitted. “But I like presents, so I am sure it’ll be fine.”

Our flight attendant, who went through our suite to check over everything, giggled, came over, and leaned down so she could gesture at the papers. “Japan is offering thanks, as they have been plagued with similar cases. This allows them to use you to try to make their home, their packs, and

their children safer. They understand they are asking much of you, as your trip to London was traumatizing.”

My nose informed me the attendant was a Fenerec, and I relaxed at the reassurance her species offered. “Is there a way we can better show appreciation?” I asked.

“You do already, through your willingness to take risks and sacrifice. We will be preparing to take off soon, and as soon as we reach altitude, I will return to escort you to where we will serve dinner.”

“Thank you.” I grinned at her before turning to face Jake, widening my eyes. “You can buy me clothes. There’s time for us to see one of their shopping districts.”

“I am confident in my ability to handle any clothing shopping required for this trip. I doubt they’ll have any stores meant for giants, but I will browse regardless.”

I chuckled, as buying clothes for Jake often involved specialty stores or custom tailoring. If I trimmed off three inches, he would be easier to shop for. Alas, as I couldn’t trim off any of his inches, we suffered through more clothing difficulties than preferred. “Maybe they’ll have shoes in your size. It’s been a while since we’ve gone shoe shopping.”

By a while, I meant before we’d fallen apart. After we’d gotten tossed back together again with an equal mix of emotional super glue and therapy, we’d either been helping the black market close cases, helping the FBI close cases, or researching the Greenwich case with little progress. I’d even put my private investigator license to use, competing with Jake to see which one of us could do a better job.

The competition had been good for us, going a long way towards repairing what the emotional super glue had held together long enough for us to get the therapy we both needed.

I still worried about Jake and his family.

“I’m going to dress you up, wear my best suit, put you on my lap, and

send taunting pictures to my mother,” he informed me.

“You can’t just flirt like that when we do not have cuddling next on the itinerary,” I complained, shooting him a glare. “That’s on par with taking an electric knife sharpener to her best knives.”

“Oh. That reminds me.”

My eyes widened. “What did you do?”

“I sent her a gift of the cheapest knives made for television on the market with a pair of electric knife sharpeners, also the cheapest ones I could find made for television.” He graced me with a rather wolfish grin. “I also sent her one of those really nice knives she’s been lusting for from Japan. The really expensive ones that are hand crafted with love and thousands of years of technique backing them. I wrapped the nice wooden box it came in with a rather thick layer of plastic wrap, which I then wrapped in aluminum foil. I then wrapped that in cloth. I completely covered the cloth in hot glue. After that had dried, I filled a big plastic tub with insulation foam. Once that cured, I carved it into the shape of a heart, painted it red, and gave her another knife from the same manufacturer. I wrote ‘have fun’ on a card. As I’m a complete monster, I put the heart in a huge box filled with glitter.”

We were going to die at his mother’s hands. I remembered when he’d gone sneaking off on a project, one he promised would make me unreasonably happy or become the reason I murdered him. I leaned over, caught the attendant’s attention when she swept through the suite on her pre-flight checks, and pointed at the fancy little phone in each armrest. “Can I use this?”

“Absolutely, ma’am.” With a smile, she showed me how to access the phone, what buttons to press to dial out, and left me to make the one call that might save my husband’s life—or help end it.

I hadn’t spoken to Pauline Thomas since we’d left Baltimore. As I would be waking her, I checked my phone’s contacts, dug out her personal phone number, and connected the call, smiling at the thought of the mayhem I

would create.

“Hello?” a sleepy Pauline answered.

“Do you like your nice knife?” I asked in my sweetest tone.

A myriad of curses answered me, and I howled my laughter over her reaction. Jake bowed his head and groaned.

“Once I freed it, yes. But do let my son know his days are numbered.”

“They are not numbered because I need him around, but you may retaliate as long as I’m not in the line of fire and there is no glitter. I draw the line at glitter. You glitter us, and your days are numbered.” Unable to help myself, I giggled. “Jake just told me about the various presents he has been sending you.”

“It seems I receive a new ‘present’ every time I mention your name.”

“He’s an idiot,” I informed his mother. “As I’m sure he’s not being forthcoming with you about any important information, we are about to depart to go to Japan, where we have a few days of glorious vacation ahead of us before we leave to visit an acquaintance in China. We have some free time, and we decided we needed to roam.”

“You’re going to Japan?” she blurted.

If someone was a mole in the FBI near the top, I had some hope I could become the perfect little piece of bait. I eyed the itinerary, picking the best location for a nice ambush without a high risk of involving innocent tourists. “We’re going to visit some shrine off the beaten path.” I gave her the date, told her we weren’t really sure which time we’d be there but mentioned how excited I was to finally get to go see somewhere nice without work being involved.

Jake nudged me with his elbow, and when I glanced at him, he shot me a questioning look. I pointed at the armed clause on our itinerary, then I pointed at the date I’d chosen to see if we had a rat near his family.

It took him a minute, but comprehension struck him, and he stared at me with wide eyes.

“That sounds like it would be good for you both. How are you doing? Jake hasn’t told us much.”

“Yeah, he’s wrapping his head around the fact that should we ever have children, I’ll be prone to having three or so at a time, which is not helping our current situation. We’re going to have to appropriately plan for an entire litter. I’m predisposed. This makes him both very happy but also very sad, as he wanted to start with two. He didn’t want both to happen at one time. As such, we’re going through a bunch of medical evaluations, so if you could please not bother him much about it, that’d be excellent. He thinks I’m fragile. Really, he’s just terrified of the thought of dealing with four of me at one time.”

“I’m genuinely terrified of the thought of dealing with four of you at one time,” she replied.

I’d feel that one for a while, especially as we were actually agreeing on something. “No couches would survive for longer than a few minutes, and I’m not sure there are sufficient rabies shots in production to handle four of me going down fox holes. Anyway, if you don’t hear from us for a while, we are busy enjoying ourselves on vacation. Text Jake if you want any souvenirs while we’re abroad. I am not to be trusted with knick-knack shopping. We’re about to leave, so I need to get off the phone. Good night, sleep well!”

To prevent her from arguing with me, I hung up. I turned my best grin on my husband. “And if there is a mole somewhere around your mother, we will find out in Japan, where we will get to counter ambush any ambushers. This is the closest we’ve gotten to actually doing something about our situation.”

“If you had a tail right now, you would be whipping it about in your general excitement.”

I nodded. “I want to bring these bastards down, and some nice people in China and Japan want to help me do it. Since we can’t seem to make progress at home, then we’ll take the fight elsewhere.”

“And there’s the Karma I know and love. Anything else you want to tell

me before you start taking names?”

I considered him with interest. “I want breakfast and cuddles, but not necessarily in that order.”

“Conveniently for you, both of those things have been penned into our schedule. But I think we’re actually being fed a very late dinner rather than an early breakfast.”

“That’s probably true.” I shrugged. “Plane time is not real time, and it does not obey any natural laws.”

“Isn’t that airport time?”

“They share a handbook.”

“May I ask a question?”

“Sure.”

“Did you really have to tell my mother you suspect we’ll have triplets?”

I giggled at his dismayed tone. “Yes. I have spent the past few months thinking you and your parents have been divided through irreparable conflicts to find out you all are just bickering over the complications of reproduction. You will tell me every time she asks about children moving forward. I will donate to one of those adopt a child charities on her behalf and send her a kit.”

Jake’s eyes widened, he retrieved his phone, unlocked it, and handed it over. Puzzled, I took it, and realized he’d given me access to his texts with his mother.

Apparently, she asked him once or twice a day if my reproductive health was okay, if we needed anything, if she could at all help, and otherwise driving my husband to the end of his rope. “Jake, you need to learn how to use more of your words to tell her she needs to calm down for a while.”

“She’s trying so hard, so I couldn’t just tell her she’s being the equivalent of Satan on steroids.”

“Just being Satan isn’t bad enough? She’s Satan on steroids?”

“She was Satan back when she was asking every other day. I love my

mother, but every time she texts me, I want to scream. And she's trying to do better and change her worst habits and improve on the racial discrimination front. She's genuinely trying."

I could respect that. Unlike my ma, Pauline tried to come back from what had done such a good job of tearing us apart. Her efforts wouldn't undo the damage she'd caused, but I could understand the reasons why everything had happened. In the aftermath, Jake had thrown himself into being the perfect husband with alarming enthusiasm, but with some help from Mellisa, I'd found a way to coax out the man I'd fallen in love with in the first place. I worried the woman he'd fallen in love with in the first place had a long way to go, but he seemed content with the time required to find me again.

Or finding us. No, in many ways, we'd become stronger because of the damage, the separation, and the heartache.

We both wanted to be where we were, together.

I reviewed the texts, counting how many child aid kits I would be putting together in her name. "I'm getting her the ones where they want you to send letters to the kids you're sponsoring." After two weeks of correspondence, I quit counting at thirty-six counts. "We'll start with the past two weeks. That is thirty-six sponsorships. I will pick the children being sponsored with glee—and then I will demand she go visit them all personally. And none of them will be in the same country."

"Wow, Karma."

"What?"

"That was beyond ruthless. In different countries? What if you find a set of siblings?"

"You're right. We can sponsor entire families in need. I shouldn't have thought of such a limit. We'll just have to make sure the sponsorships are located far enough apart she has to work to meet them all."

"I'm not sure how that's how the sponsorships work, babe."

I stared into his eyes. "It is now."

“Please marry me.”

I laughed at the memory of how we’d fallen together in the first place. “Once your mother has at least a hundred sponsorships to contend with, we can go run away and do a little ceremony properly somewhere. It’s an excuse to put you in a suit. I’d also like to remind you that we have done the get married thing once already. It remains a disaster, although our therapist seems to think there’s hope for us, assuming we ever leave our bedroom.”

“But why would we want to leave our bedroom?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. The last time she asked me that, I pointed at our RV and asked her if she’s ever seen you with your shirt off. Then I freaked out because she has seen you with your shirt off, and then I cried because of the competition.”

“You have no competition, Karma.”

“I know that, my fox knows that, but some stupid part of my brain is utterly convinced there’s competition who is going to steal you,” I reminded him.

“I like reassuring you several times a day. You get very cuddly when you need reassurance.”

I bet he liked it. “If it turns out I look just like my mother and anyone else in my family, it’s not going to end well, Jake. The only reason I handle Amelia around so well is that she just keeps getting these absolutely disgusted looks when you don’t have your shirt on.”

“I am really not her type. And her wolf knows I’m claimed property. Your fox has acknowledged Amelia isn’t a threat, so you don’t think she’s a threat. Your fox still views Mellisa as a threat. She’s really not.”

“Logically, I know this.”

“It’s probably because you can’t smell the mating bond like Fenerec can.” Jake captured my hand in his and brought it to his mouth, giving me a kiss and taking a sniff. “You smell like a fox who has rolled around in the scent of a handsome male wolf.”

I could distinguish the various scents of the wolves, identifying Jake by his unique signature, but I couldn't detect his scent on me or mine on him. Everyone promised it was there, but my nose refused to acknowledge it. "Do you think we're missing some form of step that would make me be able to smell it?"

"It's possible. The mating bond didn't take hold until you'd decided you wanted to find out what being submissive would win you. You're usually anything but submissive. Maybe it has to deal with how you struggle to balance your submissive and dominant sides? It's something worth exploring." He gave my hand another kiss and released my hand. "We can try that the next time we cuddle."

"Experimental cuddling while we join the mile high club?" I snickered. "They put intimate cuddling right on our itinerary, Jake. We're being expected to be perverts on a plane."

"Talk about them being damned good hosts, though. This is definitely going to be the best flight experience of my life. I can't imagine any flight ever topping this."

I couldn't, either. "We should definitely experiment with our intimate cuddling session. What do you have in mind?"

"We shall take turns pampering each other. There shall be zero selfishness allowed on this flight."

"We've already lost that whole idea, Jake. Being the pampered party is a complete act of selfishness."

Jake frowned, and then he shrugged. "I more meant we had to try to figure out what the absolute best way of pampering each other is without indulging in our personal cravings at the time."

While it took me a few minutes, I realized what he meant. "Oh, that is a good idea. Does the pampered party get to help with the guessing?"

"It'll be like paint by numbers but with cuddling."

"You have good ideas. You should make these suggestions more often."

“We’ll need to set timers or one of us will get carried away.” Jake smirked at me.

As I couldn’t figure out which one of us he meant, I shrugged. “I’m sure we’ll figure it out as we go. We’re getting good at that.”

“That we are.”

FOUR



“Our hosts find us to be funny.”

DINNER, which consisted of a sampling of the various delicacies China had to offer, did an excellent job of curtailing our cuddling plans. While we enjoyed joining the mile high club, rather than explore the wonders of cuddling by numbers, we dozed. An amused Amelia woke us for the work portion of our flight, which we both protested with sleepy yawns.

“Our hosts find us to be funny, as they expected you two to be quite rowdy. Instead, you got deceptively quiet. Upon realizing you two had cuddled yourself right to sleep, they worried. I promised that you two would not be taking a nap if everything wasn’t to your liking. Then they worried you were ill, as they were under the impression you cannot live without appropriate affections. As most of them are Fenerec, they about had a mass panic attack. I told them you’ve been so affectionate lately we were relieved you finally managed to handle your cuddling and affection sanely. Then they worried you’d overwork yourselves. I couldn’t argue with that one, but Mellisa said you’re both driven, haven’t had much meaningful work lately, and would benefit greatly from having a job to do. She used the work dog analogy again.”

I snorted, as her lecture about meaningful work came up once or twice a month, usually around the time I vented over the damned private investigator license people kept making me use. “That’s why I still have that stupid

license. She used that on me.” I stretched and shooed her away. “We’re up, we’re up. Thank our hosts, and we’ll be out and ready to work in a few minutes.”

“But will you cuddle with Jake first?”

Jake whined and tried to hide under the blanket.

I laughed. “I seem to have sufficiently tired my wolf out, and I will survive without being cuddled. I will, however, take advantage of that shower. They have a shower on an airplane, Amelia.”

“Yeah. Someone could live on board one of these. It’s amazing. I’ll tell them you’ll be out in a few minutes. I’ve been assured the shower can fit two. I believe our hosts expect you to shower together.”

“Our hosts are strange, but I find them to be likable people. Up, up. We need to shower, then we can work and see what info China dug up for us.” The thought of finally making progress drove me out of the warm and comfortable bed, and Amelia fled before I had a chance to steal the blankets from Jake. “I will use my teeth, Mr. Thomas!”

That got him moving, and he shot me a glare. “This would be a lot nicer if you meant the good bite.”

As Fenerec did a lot of talking with their teeth, I showed him mine and issued a sole warning chitter. “I want a shower, and you need to wash my back and hair.”

I’d even brought the lotus flower shampoo he liked, as I’d recruited his father to go to the spa to buy more for me. As I wasn’t a true monster, I’d even gotten him some more of his preferred green tea scent.

“So, you’re saying you want to cuddle in the shower.”

I rolled my eyes. “We can’t disappoint our host, Jake. Come on, get with the program.” I bounced into the shower to discover it was plenty spacious for two, the water rained down from the ceiling, and it had a nice tiled floor where adults could take leave of their senses. “They must have converted the cargo bay to hold water. Tankless water heater, maybe?”

“This plane is a marvel of technology, and I now wish we could afford one. We wouldn’t even need to fly it. We’d just revamp the plane to be our house.”

“No. We have a house, and we do not need another house. The current house is trouble, especially since we aren’t living in it right now.”

He chuckled and joined me in the shower. “Are you luring me in here just to cuddle, or do you have something else on your mind?”

I pressed against the shower wall to escape a potential nasty surprise and turned the water on, waiting for Jake to confirm we wouldn’t freeze or boil before joining him. “I wanted your thoughts about the Chinese and Japanese working on the case.”

“I think after London, both countries are being smart about their general plan. China has a lot more Fenerec than Japan, and Japan’s packs are small. They got lucky and weren’t hit hard by the plague a while back, but they’re protective of their people. The Greenwich assholes are willing to attack a fox, so there is no reason for them to believe they won’t attack the packs next. Unless they help us, they can’t help themselves—and there’s plenty of evidence that these people are after some pretty dangerous tech.”

I remembered. I’d figured out the initial connection that led us to believe they were after some form of weapon tech, although nobody had been able to learn anything more than that. My interference with the Greenwich case had brought me into the picture, but I doubted they were going to such extremes because I’d been smart enough to ask the right question.

Someone would have eventually.

“And the Greenwich family?”

“Safe and sound last check, and we confirmed your initial leads. He has better security, and Mr. Greenwich has been verified as being innocent of wrongdoing. If you hadn’t saved his daughter, that might not have been the case, though. He’s been transferred to a different project, one outside of those systems.”

“I cut off their easy path to victory.”

Jake shrugged, grabbed my lotus flower shampoo, and squirted some on top of my head before going to work making sure I’d be properly presentable when we arrived in Japan. “Your hair is coming in with its white tips again.”

I kept my head tilted back so I wouldn’t end up with soap in my eyes. “Already?”

I’d cut it a week ago.

“You’re up to about an inch of white now. Just leave it. I like it.”

“Jake, I look like a freak with my hair doing that.”

“Just look?”

“You are an asshole, Mr. Jake Thomas!”

“But you like it, Mrs. Jake Thomas.”

I did, and I pouted at him. “It’s been a week. People do not grow an inch of hair in a week.”

“I think you’ve grown more than an inch. You had Amelia hack off about six inches, and it’s getting back to where it’s at. Obviously, your fox does not approve of any attempts to remove the equivalent of your tail.”

“Tails are supposed to be attached to my ass, not my head.”

“But I like it, Karma. Just leave it. Maybe it will help draw attention to us.”

I considered that, and if my lineage was why the bastards behind the Greenwich case were after me, it might help me serve as bait. “I’ll leave it. I’ll even put it up in a tail so it’s more obvious.”

“There you go. Consider it part of the disguise.”

“What disguise? The whole point isn’t to be disguised.”

“That was a poor choice of words,” he admitted. “Mostly, I was thinking about that high schooler stunt you pulled with the Corvette. I asked Dad if I could buy the Corvette, did you know that? He told me no. Then I asked Mom, and she also said no, but she suggested I buy one just like it. But I didn’t want one just like it. I wanted that specific one.”

I sighed at the memory of the Corvette. “It was such a nice drive, too.”

“If we got one just like it, it might not be just like it.”

“We can’t even try to steal it now because we’d be the top suspects,” I complained. “Great job, Jake. We could have tested the FBI’s vehicular security to see how long it took them to figure out we’d made off with the car.”

“It’s tracked, Karma.”

I rolled my eyes. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Tracked vehicles are easily found.”

“So we sniff out where they installed the tracker, remove it, and put it on something else. Like a pigeon or a drone.”

Jake worked his fingers into my scalp, and I closed my eyes to enjoy the sensation. After he conquered my hair, he said, “I feel like I should be discouraging you, but at the same time, I want to know how the FBI would react if their Corvette started to fly.”

“We could get a tiny boat, put it in a river, and see how far it gets before they figure out we sent it on an adventure to the ocean.” I opened my eyes to stare up at him. “We could put the tracker in a bottle and toss it into the ocean with a note.”

“Do you even care about the car right now or do you just want to fuck with our co-workers?”

As I still technically worked in the FBI and had medical leave, and Jake was on leave but available for duty when needed, I still had co-workers. I counted as interior while Jake remained a special agent, something I’d struggled with for the first few months.

The first time I’d gotten to venture off with my private investigation license and do something he hadn’t been able to with his badge, I’d almost forgiven the FBI for the stupid card and their willingness to let me use it as long as I followed a few set rules.

I’d followed their rules, and while we didn’t get much work, we’d gotten

some.

The Inquisition kept us much busier, and they paid a hell of a lot better.

One job, following up on a terrorism lead the FBI had deemed a low priority, had bagged us a wanted criminal, his bounty, and a bonus from the Inquisition, who hadn't expected us to sniff somebody out, doing so with minimal damage to life, limb, and property.

"I might want to fuck with our co-workers," I admitted. "But I would take good care of that car. Maybe we should ask the Inquisition if we can put together an op to see if we can steal it. If we manage to infiltrate the parking garage with it, steal the vehicle, and make it a certain distance before they catch us, we get to keep it."

"It disturbs me that they might bite; confirming the security of one of their buildings is important, and people do try to infiltrate the organization to see if it can be done." Jake turned me, grabbed a cloth, and scrubbed my back. "You can't go back to bed, and we need to work rather than cuddle, so you're going to have to accept this back washing with innocent intent for once this year."

"I'd offer to wash yours, but I can't reach, and if you sit on the floor, there will be cuddling instead of back washing."

"I am sure I can survive without a back wash for once this year, but you're going to have to make it up to me later."

"Damned needy wolf."

"Says the fox who becomes despondent if I have not catered to your every desire in at least a few hours."

I waited until he deemed my back to be clean before I turned, stood on my toes, and prodded him in a chest. "Have you ever looked in a mirror?"

"I have, and honestly, I don't really get it, but my stupid, chocolatey eyes can lure you to bed with a single glance, so I'm all right with the situation." He smirked, grabbed his green tea body wash, and challenged me with a raised brow. "Let's play a game, Karma. Let's see how long we can show

each other loving affection without heading to bed. Whomever surrenders gets to enjoy being conquered.”

“That is how we both lose our minds within two to three days. Amelia and Mellisa might kill us. Our hosts may become alarmed.”

“Our hosts will see us being hopelessly romantic and in love, and they will be thrilled with our displays of affection. We’ll have to inquire on what levels of affection are permitted by their customs and play to those rules, though.”

“Why are we doing this?”

“If Greenwich shows up, and you haven’t gotten attention in a while, you’ll leave bloody smears across the entirety of Japan and China when you’re done, thus removing a problem. I’d also be forced to reward you greatly for your efforts.”

As my fox had certain violent tendencies, especially when she thought someone threatened Jake, I could see how his plan might work.

Once my fox decided to end someone, that was it. She’d use whatever tools were necessary to get the job done.

I took care to make sure my fox understood there were rules on when she could take the violent approach. Overall, she trusted me to obtain the proper evidence of wrongdoing and acquire clearance to permanently stop the problem.

Then I trusted her to take care of the problem if an opportunity arose.

“But will I be properly armed, Jake?”

“We’ll find out soon enough.”



THE SHOWER REVITALIZED ME, and I dove into the work portion of my day with enough enthusiasm I worried Jake. I sorted the paperwork I’d

gathered for us, gave Jake the pile involving my activities from the age of sixteen onward, and began the tedious process of identifying how my life and the Greenwich culprits overlapped. To complicate the situation, our Chinese hosts had done work of their own, isolating every flight with a Chinese or Tibetan infant on board being exported to the United States.

It rankled on my nerves that they viewed children being adopted elsewhere as exports. I hid my irritation, as they'd acquired one of the critical pieces of the missing puzzle.

Four years prior to when I thought I had been born and my adoption date, an infant matching my general description and origin had been sent to the United States. Her birth certificate, pulled out of the Chinese system upon discovery, matched my falsified one with a few changed details.

The birth location had been correct, but the date had been changed—and my parents had different names. My name hadn't changed, something the Chinese had commented as being unusual. Worse, because the location remained the same, it was probable I had been born sometime within six months prior to the village's destruction and abandonment, putting me at over forty years old. I struggled to imagine parents coping with an infant who remained an infant for an entire decade, growing at slower than a snail's pace before easing into something closer to a human development rate.

I would need more time than I had to wrap myself around the reality of my true age. Instead, I focused on the issue of my name. In China, kidnappers were typically wise enough to change the infant's name when falsifying documents.

It made digging out the truth harder.

I suspected the person who had made the note needed some practical experience dealing with criminals. While there were smart criminals, most suffered through a severe lack of common sense. When they weren't writing down their activities, they talked to others about it and bragged to the wrong people—or any people—about the things they'd done, among other things.

The ‘among other things’ often put a kink in the investigation and resulted in agents and police officers seeking out therapy to cope with the general stupidity of people.

Once, someone had murdered three people over a brand of candy he couldn’t open without tearing the package the wrong way. As killing someone over his difficulties hadn’t been bad enough, he’d written a letter to the company expecting compensation for removing a critical problem in their manufacturing process. The case had crossed state lines, which had brought me into it.

My partner, one of the many men who believed women had no business being in law enforcement, had become so distressed at the idiocy I’d sent him off to therapy and had dealt with the work myself. I’d considered therapy, too. There came a point where the sheer stupidity of some people broke even the most hardened of investigators.

The Chinese had identified my first American parents, a couple who had been murdered, their bodies mauled and left to rot deep within a park.

Their adopted baby, presumed to be me, had vanished without a trace.

I’d seen the type of damage before in Pennsylvania. “Hey, Jake?”

“Find something?”

I handed over the pictures of the bodies of my first adoptive parents. “Look familiar?”

“The people or the state of their bodies?”

“The state of their bodies.”

“Yeah. Several of the corpses you fell on in that gorge had similar damage. Where did you get this?”

“The Chinese followed a lead. They were probably my first American parents.”

“Murdered, torn to shreds, and left to rot out in the woods?”

I nodded.

“With a child who disappeared without a trace, like the Henry kid?”

Except Jacob showed up at his uncle's place," my partner replied, narrowing his eyes and looking over the photographs again. "I'd suspected a Fenerec attack of some sort, but the autopsy showed the victims had been shot, killed, and then torn apart. The cuts were consistent with those of curved tools. They're too sharp and clean for Fenerec claws."

"You actually got the autopsy reports?"

"I did some of the investigating while you were in Europe. They wanted to keep me busy. I also did some looking into the case while you were in New York." Jake flipped through the papers. "The cause of death is due to gunfire, one bullet for the man, two for the woman. The notation here matches—torn apart after death, and the cuts were consistent with those of curved tools."

What could I possibly have in common with the Greenwich and Henry cases? "This doesn't make any sense. That implies the group was doing this long before the Greenwich case started—which we had somewhat guessed from the photographs I'd gotten from the Henry family."

"I think that's part of our problem. We have no idea how early this group formed, what they're up to, or why they're up to it. More importantly, why are they trying to mask their murders the way they are? Autopsies are able to easily determine curved weapons are being used. It does imply they've been aware of the Inquisition for a long time and might be a group of Normals or witches? If they wanted to blame Fenerec and are Fenerec, they would have just killed them while a Fenerec. That way, they'd be identified as such."

"Unless they don't want to be identified as Fenerec."

"Unlikely. It's not easy for a Fenerec to remain human when engaging in that sort of behavior. They would have to have ridiculously good control to take such an approach with people they killed without the wolf becoming riled up. It looks more like they were trying to blame Fenerec but lacked the appropriate tools for the job. Also, they went with modern lore for the kills."

"Modern lore?"

Jake curled his fingers into claws and growled at me. My fox went on high alert, and I bared my teeth at him, holding back her urge to chitter a warning.

He smirked, reached over, and pressed his finger to my nose. “The wolf man lore, where they take on characteristics of men and wolves at the same time. That modern lore.”

Oh. I nipped his finger, allowed the fox a single chitter to warn him he’d pushed her buttons, and replied, “It could be related to those pro-Normal groups we got that briefing about a few months ago.” I had filed the group away as a problem to keep in mind, but I hadn’t factored them into the Greenwich case.

I would not make that mistake again in the future.

“That’s actually a significant possibility. There are several groups, and the primary one the Inquisition is investigating operates in a completely different fashion. While they’re performing acts of terrorism against Fenerec and witches alike, this group seems to be engaging in actual terrorism.”

“You mean the weapon security systems and similar Mr. Greenwich worked on.”

“Right. If you can access the security software of global superpowers and take over their weapons, you can do a lot of damage in a hurry. Men like Mr. Greenwich are good targets for that sort of thing. He adores his family.”

“And people who adore their families will do terrible things to protect them.”

We’d seen that with Pauline, as to her, I hadn’t been an actual part of her family.

“Exactly. And unlike my mother, who is still undergoing education on how to be the absolute best mother-in-law to have ever walked this planet, had Mr. Greenwich caved and given the kidnappers the information, millions would have paid the price for it.”

I agreed. While we had paid hefty prices for his mother’s actions, it

barely counted as a ripple when compared to the possibilities of the Greenwich case. I'd accidentally made a difference in a situation where one man could bring destruction to an entire country of people.

I didn't want to think about what would happen if a terrorism group got access to the weapon arsenals of global superpowers.

"What do we know about the weapon systems, really?"

"I know more than I want to know about them. But, in a nutshell, Mr. Greenwich was working on the security software that manages launch codes, warhead activations, and targeting."

"So, everything needed to launch a warhead was at his fingertips?"

"Yep."

"Wouldn't that be classified information?"

"It is classified, but we're classified."

"I would know if I was classified, Mr. James Thomas. I know what is involved with getting classification, and the first rule of classification is you don't spread you're classified—and that the government has stuck its entire hand up your ass before deciding to give you said classification."

He stared at me, and he raised a brow. Then he waited.

I narrowed my eyes, crossed my arms, and met his stare. "I would remember an entire government entity shoving their fist directly up my ass."

"It isn't literal, Karma."

"I would still remember that!"

"Karma, you've been handling classified information for months. You look at the clearance pages, throw them across our RV, and chitter because they annoy you."

"That isn't real clearance. That's pretend clearance to make it look like I actually do something productive," I informed him. "The amount of actual productive research accomplished before now: nil. We had to run away to Japan and China to get something done."

"That doesn't mean you're not cleared."

While foxes didn't usually growl, humans could, and I flung in a few curses at him as well before getting up, going to the pile of paperwork, and digging through it in search of one of the clearance sheets warning we'd be slaughtered in court and elsewhere if we breached security. I located one, returned to my seat at the table we'd commandeered for our work, and reread it.

In the United States, the government had three primary types of clearances: confidential, secret, and top secret. The sheet went into the last category, which should have required a lot more verifications than we'd undergone. I could have, with a little squinting, bought into someone having given me confidential clearance on certain cases. The FBI required frequent background checks of its agents, so I could understand skipping part of the process.

"I do not remember any government entity doing a complete investigation of my person to get this, Jake."

"As if I'd let them."

"You let those nosy doctors," I reminded him.

"Yes, those are doctors, not government entities. And they weren't investigating your ass."

"That is true." Since I'd started gaining weight, I actually had an ass, and I liked how my jeans fit. I maintained my lean physique, but Jake's feeding program had gotten some good results, including some extra padding where I'd been a bony mess prior to his efforts.

One day, we might be able to order pepperoni pizza without having twin meltdowns. I endured reminders of what I'd lost without gaining much in exchange. He did as well, with a bonus of having eaten so much of it he doubted he'd be able to look at another pizza for the rest of his life.

"We didn't go through standard clearance procedures. The Inquisition handles things like that. Unlike the Normals acquiring clearance, we face death or worse for breaking our clearances. Why investigate us further than

they already have done? Our loyalties have already been tested.”

I couldn't argue with him, so I didn't. “This would be much easier if we had a motive.”

“I know.”

“It might help if I understood why people would stoop as low as to kidnap and murder children for their ambitions.” Despite the passage of time following my ma's attempt to kill me, I failed to comprehend the depths of her treachery and mental illness. Logically, I understood she'd harbored prejudices against anyone different from her. My skin color had been a forgivable enough sin.

My behavior, on the other hand, had not fallen in line with her expectations. I credited her with having given me a chance, unlike her son.

Mellisa had acquired the photographs of his broken body, giving me another tool necessary to fully accept everything my ma had done, none of which had been my fault. Coming to terms with having no responsibility for the madness of another would take even more time.

The therapist had done a lot of work making sure Jake and I had the time we needed to evaluate, accept, and move on from the various sources of trauma we'd faced over the years.

“Honestly, I'm wondering what had happened between your first parents being murdered and your ma taking over your care—and how she connects to the operators. Had they connected with her after London or had she been part of their group all along?” Jake wrinkled his nose. “And if she had been involved with them all along, why not kill you from the start? Why did you have more value alive?”

“Maybe they were trying to get living children to groom into their organization?”

“Your ma, for all her faults, did too good of a job of instilling ethics into you for that. My opinion, of course—but your ma didn't behave as though she was cultivating you to become a ruthless killer.” He opened his mouth to

say something but snapped his teeth together and frowned.

“She beat those tendencies out of me,” I supplied, aware of his general inability to handle the difference between his family’s playful smacks versus what I’d endured, which had gone far beyond the acceptable.

I hadn’t known that as a child, and I hadn’t clued in on it until having a few long talks with Mellisa about it.

The Thomas family pistol whipped each other, but they spoke the language of wolves, which boiled down to one part innate violence, ten parts obsessive affection, and an unfathomable need to be touchy-feely with each other. I’d gotten a hefty dose of needing touchy-feely interactions due to being a fox, and I went far beyond their displays of contained violence.

I struggled with the affection part of the equation.

That made me wonder, and I considered my husband with a frown. “Do you think she was trying to beat my general ability to be affectionate out of me? I mean, you know how much I struggle with that sort of thing. I’m more likely to kick your keys out of your hand than ask for a hug.”

“That had occurred to me, which is why I can’t dispute the possibility your ma was trying to cultivate you into becoming the kind of person this group would like. It’s possible. We might need to dig into your parents’ financials.”

I grimaced at the thought of having to go through so many years of my childhood, printed out, itemized, and scrutinized. “More importantly, if my ma did have documents she was supposed to give me, where did she get them? Why did she destroy them?”

“And if they were related to your species, why did she hide you aren’t human? She had to know something. Why else beat you so much if you showed any animalistic behaviors?”

“Well, she was very concerned about her reputation and the appearance of our family to the point she murdered her own son.”

“That’s true.”

“You can’t expect sanity from the insane, Jake. And to kill her own child because he wasn’t the perfect, healthy baby she wanted is an act of utter insanity. We’ll never know which form of mental illness, but you have to be mentally ill to do that.”

Jake heaved a sigh. “Not necessarily. Not every human is good, and she valued her reputation more than his life—and she likely saw a way out of the situation she believed she could hide well enough to fool everyone, including her husband. Not every killer is mentally ill, you know that as well as I do.”

“I know, but it seems easier to swallow if I can say she wasn’t quite right in the head. The other option is chilling.”

“It means she knew precisely what she was doing, did so understanding she did a foul and terrible thing, and cared more about how others perceived her than the lives of the children in her care. And worse, the system ignored any of the signs—as did your pa.”

I nodded. “And she was smart.”

“She was smart enough to murder her own child and instill enough plausible deniability she got away with his murder. And your pa probably couldn’t bring himself to believe she’d do it.”

That I could also believe.

Pa had always tried to see the best in people, even when they showed him their worst.

“Let’s assume your ma was in league with this group. Why would she join forces with them?”

I took a few minutes to think it through, and I grimaced at where my thoughts took me. “I can think of a few reasons, but the top one would be getting help to hide the baby she didn’t want—and get a lead on another child without the legal loopholes on adoption. I was adopted from overseas, which is a cheaper and easier process. What if the entire adoption had been falsified? And if she was willing to kill off a baby for being inconvenient and ruining her reputation, hiding it from everyone for a long time, she would be

willing to raise me for whatever goal they had in mind.”

“Such as cultivating someone inside the FBI to do their dirty work. We already found some moles, so it was entirely possible they wanted you to be a mole, too. I could see this group trying to manipulate you through your parents—and it would have been much easier if your ma cooperated with them.”

I could buy into that theory, which disturbed me enough I grabbed the pictures of the people believed to have been my intended parents.

In life, they’d been a young couple ready to add to their family. The autopsy notes indicated the woman had undergone a partial hysterectomy at some stage in her life and likely would have developed some form of cancer. The man had suffered from undiagnosed cancer and wouldn’t have lived for long.

“The autopsy report, outside of the slashing, is pretty bad,” I commented.

“Yeah, I saw that. I appreciate how thorough the autopsy work had been, but I cringed at the thought of what would have happened if they hadn’t of been murdered.”

“Yeah, that’s not a pretty picture. She would have been a young, single mother with an adopted child and grieving for her husband in a world that had little care for single moms no matter what the cause. Then she ran high odds of getting sick and dying, too.” I shook my head, pondering how to connect the deaths of my first parents with how I had been adopted again.

The time frame spanned years, and I’d stayed an infant through the entirety of it. “Someone would have noticed I hadn’t been growing, Jake. It’s impossible. Someone doesn’t stay an infant for years without undergoing stunted development testing.”

“Which leads me to believe your ma knew you weren’t human, your pa didn’t, and she did a lot of work hiding your developmental delays. She tried to bar you from going to the doctors. Your pa took you on the sly.”

Little by little, things began to make some sense, although gaping holes in

my history remained. “And because he took me on the sly, he didn’t have good records and couldn’t really put the pieces together himself, especially if the doctors weren’t all that concerned.”

“And when you were growing up, doctors weren’t concerned about those sorts of abnormalities. You were slow to develop but you were healthy, so why be worried? Your ma probably fed him some lines he could understand, and what mattered to him was that you were healthy.”

I read between the lines. “And because I was healthy, Ma had no reason to get rid of me as long as he didn’t express any worry over my slow development.”

“And your pa was a man of integrity, so he wouldn’t accuse his wife of murdering their son without proof—and your ma was a lot of things, but she did a good job of hiding the truth. She had just enough plausible deniability and had hidden just enough evidence to dodge her day in court. The only justice served was that you rid the Earth of her before history could repeat itself.”

“Do you think my ma was involved with them?”

“I can think of two scenarios. In the first scenario, they were the ones who kept you, confirmed you weren’t human, and then used your ma to cultivate you. When they couldn’t cultivate you, they tried to get rid of you, who would be living evidence of a different crime: the murder of your first parents. The other scenario is that someone else rescued you from the group and put you into the adoption system with falsified papers. But who? Why?”

I could think of a possibility. “The same person who sent me to America in the first place.”

“That is a possibility, yes. I think we need to figure out what happened to you between the death of your first American parents and you being adopted by the Johnson family.”

“Which leads us to the next question. Who am I, really?”

“Well, the original birth certificate agrees with the falsified one; your

name is Karma, and it has always been Karma.”

I eyed my husband, aware he itched to pun my name. “I will pull your intestine out through your big toe if you weaponize my name.”

“Just once?”

“No.”

He pouted.

“You’ll probably survive. Are there any other possibilities?”

“A Good Samaritan might have seen an imperiled infant and had taken you to a hospital.”

“That doesn’t explain the modified birth certificate, though.”

“No, it doesn’t. It is possible the someone could have been part of an organization like the Inquisition, adjusted the birth certificate to hide you, and then put you into the system.”

“That’s unlikely,” I pointed out.

“Why?”

“Well, if the original birth certificate was in English...”

“You make an excellent point.” Jake frowned. “But that implies someone in Tibet or China was in on you being moved around in the first place.”

“Well, they were able to find the original birth certificate. Maybe a group like the Inquisition but based in China? Do the Chinese have their own version of the Inquisition?”

“Yes, they do. But that leads to another issue.”

“Which is?”

“Why did they hide they have a shapeshifting fox species from the rest of the Inquisition?”

I snickered at the first thought to come to mind. “You wolves can’t handle us foxes, that’s why.”

“Mrs. Thomas, you are going to pay for that the next time we have several hours and a good bed.”

“Am I paying in cash, credit, or pretending I have zero interest and you

have to convince me?”

“Obviously, you have to pretend you have zero interest and I need to convince you. Why was that even a question?”

“You’re the one who said you like it when I dress up as a prostitute.”

“Can I dress you up as a prostitute while you pretend you have zero interest and need to be thoroughly convinced?”

I played at needing several minutes to think that one through. “I suppose, but only this once.”

“With that important business settled, that leaves us with several problems we need to solve for this case to make sense.”

“Who am I is only scratching at the surface.”

“Why you’re so important dead or alive needs to be investigated. I like the idea of someone, possibly a family member or associate, wanting to hide you, making arrangements for the Johnson adoption. That tracks—and it would explain why they allowed the adoption in the first place.”

“What do you mean?”

“Karma, your mother was the top suspect in the disappearance and murder of her son. They don’t just allow people flagged as top suspects in an infanticide case to just go around adopting infants. Her record would have been flagged as a suspect in the case, and she should have been refused any children. But she wasn’t. But I noticed one thing about the kids she fostered.”

I winced, understanding his point without having to take any time to think about it. “They were all perfectly healthy, cute, and well-behaved kids. None of them were particularly troubled, of sweet disposition, and rarely did anything that triggered the Wrath of Ma.”

“And that had to have been intentional. Someone knew your ma had likely killed her son but they needed a home for someone who would hide your problems from society. Your ma was probably given an offer. The crime of her son’s murder would disappear and cease being investigated seriously, but in exchange, she would raise you. That would also justify why she had

the documentation she claimed she had. Part of the deal would have been to give you the intel when you reached adulthood.”

“Except she hadn’t.”

“You had exposed what she’d done, so she wanted petty revenge. But maybe we can get the documents.”

“Safe deposit boxes?”

“She had some, yes. But we haven’t opened them yet.”

“Why not?”

Jake shrugged. “You need to put in the request or we needed proof to give to the bank.”

“That is the dumbest damned thing I’ve ever heard, Mr. Jake Thomas. We’ve been fussing over all this shit when we could have just filed some papers and checked the safe deposit boxes?”

“There was no reason to think the documents were stored in them. They’re the small boxes that don’t fit papers.”

Ah. That made sense. “You think it’s jewelry and things like that.”

“Probably.”

“USB sticks exist, Jake. They fit in those boxes.”

He grumbled a few curses, eyed me, and then picked up the phone, dialing a number. “Jake Thomas. Can you see if you can get access to the closed safe deposit boxes from the Thomas and Johnson case? Mrs. Thomas is upset with me that we have not opened the boxes, as USB sticks can fit in that sized box. Yeah, the ones we flagged as probably containing jewelry. Thank you.” Jake hung up. “They’ll have to wait for the bank to open, but they’ll get the warrants to check. We just assumed that the documents, which would have been issued before the invention of USB sticks, would have been in paper format.”

Assumptions hampered cases more often than not, and I muttered curses at the oversight. After taking a few minutes to think about it, I said, “Well, if they do find something, I’m sure they can find some mystical way to send us

the documents in Japan or China. Had they found anything prior, we would have been deprived of a chance to go overseas and handle this issue directly. As such, I will permit this oversight. But just this once.”

“You just want to watch me shop for you in Japan.”

I stared into his pretty brown eyes and replied, “I do seem to enjoy this activity for some reason.”

“You just like making me do all the work.”

I leered at him.

“You win.”

“You’ll win, too—sometime in Japan or China. Maybe.”

“Maybe?”

“You’ll have to convince me,” I informed him.

“Are you sure you’re not going to regret issuing that challenge later?”

“As if you can actually make me regret that. But if it makes you feel better, you can try.”

“Game on, Karma. Just remember you only have yourself to blame.”

“Whatever will I do? Having to blame myself for a good time while yanking on your chain. I just don’t know how I will possibly get through this.”

“Could you possibly get any more sarcastic?”

“I don’t know. Should I try?”

“Please, no.”

I laughed at my husband and went back to work trying to find out what else I could dig out from the files destined to forever change our lives.

FIVE



“I don't know what I'm hopeful for.”

WITH THE AWARENESS that not even my age was correct and I was actually at least ten years older than I'd believed, I reset my investigation, threw out everything I thought I'd known about myself, and I started again.

This time, after making use of the plane's phone and a helpful Inquisitor in the United States, I began with the infant me, aged somewhere between six or seven years old while being locked in the body of a newborn, arriving in the United States. Airport records confirmed I had been brought on board a plane, and in the holy grail of investigative work, I had been accompanied by a Tibetan woman. Her name and appearance didn't match mine, but the FBI had information on her, as she possessed a work visa to help bring children being adopted into the United States. They'd kept track of her comings and goings.

The woman lived, she had taken up residence in Montana after obtaining citizenship, and someone would be knocking on her door at a reasonable hour to learn more about her work.

As part of her visa conditions, she'd submitted a list of all children brought into the United States along with complete copies of their records. Every scrap of paper that had come with the child had gone into an information vault. Someone had made a note my file had included a rather lengthy series of pages.

The Inquisitor promised to get the records pulled, informed me he would call me back, and hung up.

Finally, progress. I placed the phone on its hook. “Jake.”

My husband looked up from his paperwork. “Yes?”

“The FBI has the records of my first adoption, when baby me, already probably six or seven years old but still a baby, had been brought into the country with a lot of paperwork. There is a woman who escorted me, and she played by the book. Because she handled immigrant children, she submitted everything to the government. There was a note with my transport she had submitted a thick stack of paperwork.”

“You started at the beginning, looked for the missing links, and found a hit?”

I pointed at the phone. “While you were reading, I called the Inquisition night staff and asked to see if we could track the airplane that had brought me into the country. The records were intact, and with the right date frame, he was able to get a hit. The escort was listed, as the tickets had been bought in a pair. The government’s notes confirm that couple was my adoptive parents. We have an actual lead.”

“Good work. Are you hopeful that those papers are about your species?”

“I don’t know what I’m hopeful for,” I admitted. “I’m more hopeful we might find out a motive.”

“You’re beautiful, and every man with functioning eyes wants you to be his wife. But I have won, and all other men are surely jealous of me.”

A laugh escaped before I could stop it. The reality of my life before Jake had been sad and painful, but day by day, I healed from the whole mess of it—even the parts Jake held responsibility for. No, especially for those parts.

Together, we thrived.

We had needed to fall before we could fly.

“No, all other men are relieved they don’t have to deal with the mess that is me,” I informed him. “There is a significant problem, though. It’s possibly

my infancy lasted between eleven to thirteen years, and I'd lived in Tibet or China somewhere for the first six or seven years of my life. Yet I came into the United States appearing to be a newborn. In good news, putting up with me comes with benefits, assuming you can conquer your current set of challenges. You should, eventually. I'm sure you'll manage somehow. It might leave me waiting a while, but I'll suffer through."

"It's like you have this little switch, and sometimes, you decide you must be as absolutely difficult as possible. It's the same switch where I need to use the cuffs so I have an intact throat when you're finished with me."

I shrugged as he spoke the truth. "I'm honestly hoping the paperwork offers some clue as to what my issue is, what sort of things I need to do should I happen to have a litter, and so on. I have made an important parental decision, however."

"We're making parental decisions already?"

"Yes. The pack has to babysit the litter so we can escape to do our jobs long enough to pay for having entire litters. And if the litters come in groups of three to five, we are not having additional litters for like twenty years. There's no way we can add to the litter for at least twenty years. My infancy lasted over a decade, Jake."

"How long are you going to be fertile for in order for this plan to work?"

"At the rate of my delayed development, I predict I will maintain fertility for at least a hundred years. Humans typically have at least twenty years of good fertility, and I seem to age somewhere between four to five times slower than a standard human, if my infancy is any indication. I flew through adolescence, though. So maybe I'll fall over dead tomorrow from old age." I allowed myself a smirk. "I really might be a cuttlefish."

"You're paying for that comment," he informed me. "I have made my first parental decision. We will have a risk of litter every time you make some sort of comment indicating you might fall over dead from old age."

Damn. "If you bust me on that, we'll be swimming in children, Jake. I'm

never going to stop. You make these irritated expressions, and your eyes flash gold. All this does is encourage me to do it some more.”

He rolled his pretty brown eyes, which were streaked with the wolf-gold I enjoyed. “I stand by my declaration. If we end up swimming in children, it’s entirely your fault for making those comments. Make them at your own risk.”

I matched him eye roll for eye roll. “Empty threat with our current issues.”

“I have my ways of making you bite, and they involve handcuffs.”

“For how many hours?”

“Approximately eight, assuming I trick you into using your teeth appropriately.”

Would either one of us survive through eight hours of that? “You can try to convince me later. Back to work. So far, we know someone in this mess was aware I’m not precisely human. The people—or person—who set me up for adoption doctored my birth certificate so Ma and Pa assumed I was a newborn. In reality, I’d been a newborn for a period of at least six years. Ma must have known something was wrong with me, as she hid my condition and slow aging, making Pa sneak me to doctor’s appointments. That leads me to believe Pa had no idea what was going on, and the arrangements were made with her rather than both of them.”

“Those are sound theories,” Jake replied, narrowing his eyes. “Perhaps she was told you had a delayed development condition that otherwise did you no harm?”

“She tried to beat the fox right out of me, Jake. And she did. I’d always assumed she hadn’t wanted people from her church to ask questions about my behavior—but what if she had been warned about how I would behave growing up?” The possibility bothered me. “That would imply it wasn’t the Greenwich operators behind my transfer and adoption. Perhaps she was paid off to do it? I don’t remember us really actually struggling for money, and once I started hunting out fox holes, we were able to move quickly and

without difficulty. As a child, I had no way of understanding how strange that was, but now? Everything about it is strange. Where did she get the money?”

“I don’t know. If there was a financial trail, I didn’t get access to it.”

We both eyed the pile of paperwork we’d failed to investigate, opting to keep each other in bed upon becoming overwhelmed.

I groaned. “Or we just missed it. We’ve neglected a lot of paperwork.”

“Karma, we’ve had over ten thousand pages of documents go through our RV in the past six months. Nobody expects us to be perfect, and our brains have been frying from trying to go through everything. If it weren’t for this trip, this batch might have been the one to do us both in.” In a louder voice, he said, “It’s like Mellisa wants to kill us using paperwork.”

“I do not,” the woman called back, and after a moment, she walked into our suite. “What are you two complaining about now?”

We pointed at the paperwork we’d brought with us.

“I don’t see what your work has to do with me.”

Jake engaged me in a staring contest and raised a brow.

Damn him and his pretty eyes, able to manipulate me into doing the work he wanted to dodge. “We’re trying to figure out my ma’s role in this mess. We’ve already figured out she wasn’t the first woman who took up the role of being my mother, but my first adoptive parents were murdered—probably by the same people behind the Greenwich kidnapping and the Henry disappearance.” I still had no idea how the Henry boy had escaped. I did my best to avoid working with that portion of the disaster, leaving it for Jake to sort out.

He hadn’t felt a need to update me on what he’d found, assuming he had found something.

I needed to do better about asking him if he was hiding things he thought would disturb me. Both of us struggled with that problem. I wondered if we’d actually move beyond the damage we’d done to ourselves and each other.

We’d find out eventually.

“I see.” Mellisa took the seat next to me, and then she whistled, which summoned Amelia, who sat next to Jake. “It seems they’re ready to discuss Karma’s adoptive family situation, Amelia.”

“About fucking time,” the Fenerec stated, and she buckled into the seat despite the pilots having done an admirable job of dodging turbulence. “I was beginning to wonder if the denial phase would ever end.”

“Denial of what? That she tried to kill me? I got over that one pretty quickly,” I admitted. “Even Mellisa said I processed that part really well.”

“It’s true. She even got to the general acceptance phase, acknowledging it wasn’t ever her fault. Amelia is more referring to the piling evidence your ma was more involved than we care to think about.”

“I don’t know if she was actually involved with the Greenwich operators or if there’s another party who was working on my behalf. I’m thinking there’s some other party who was working on my behalf. The Henry case has a lot of similarities to my case. As in the bodies and their condition. It makes me wonder if Jacob had help escaping from them—and if I had been helped, too. I mean, I must have been helped. I was just an infant at the time.”

“Or you shapeshifted,” Jake said. “Jacob’s a young Fenerec. Accidental ritual—and his family didn’t know it.”

“Pardon?” I blurted.

“Jacob’s a young Fenerec. He may have shifted to escape. He was not responsible for the deaths, though. But he may have transformed to his wolf to escape. I had smelled the wolf, but I hadn’t involved you with that portion of the investigation.”

Right. “Because I didn’t know about wolves back then.”

“Exactly so. But that’s why Jacob relaxed around us really quickly. You smelled of safety and security, and I smelled like another wolf—and his wolf would have recognized mine meant no harm. I did alert the appropriate people he was a probable stray so he could get into a pack environment.”

“He’s all right?”

“Jacob? He’s fine. If the Greenwich operators show up around him again, they’ll get a very violent surprise. His new pack is on guard, and they don’t have many puppies.”

Having seen how far the wolves would go to protect their puppies, with little care for who they hurt outside of their circles, I could believe the pack would handle any interference with excessive violence. Rather than fixate on the past mistakes we’d both made, I asked, “What’s an accidental ritual?”

“A playmate performed the ritual, guided by her wolf. It’s a risk when you have young wolves, and I guess her parents had taken their eyes off the kids for a few minutes. Not a good idea with young puppies around. They’ll end up a mated pair, which works out well for everyone involved. Don’t ask me how it’ll work out; I don’t know. I only followed long enough to find out the girl wouldn’t be punished for being left unsupervised with someone her wolf was invested in. They were both too young to have made those decisions, but it has been made. They’re getting help on the emotional and mental fronts. They’ll be okay. Even after two years, they’re impossible to split at this stage. Everybody’s happy with the situation.”

I decided rather than question the age of the children, I would be happy they were making things work. I could understand how it might.

Childhood sweethearts marrying later down the road fit well with the perceived American dream. I recognized for some that the dream became a nightmare, but I would hope the best for Jacob and the girl who had turned him into a wolf.

In some ways, I envied them. If I’d been a wolf instead of a fox, a lot would have been different.

“We do our best to prevent things like this from happening, but it happens,” Mellisa said. “The girl is so submissive it’s painful, and when her wolf is that desperate, it’s not a surprise to me at all. One of my trips was to have a talk with the kids and make sure they’re doing all right. Jacob is going to roll out dominant, which will partner well with her. We’ve had to get a

little creative with disciplining her, but it's been working out all right. We have her doing the Fenerec equivalent of community service.”

“Do you think the Greenwich operators knew Jacob was a Fenerec?”

“We didn't know he was one,” Jake informed me. “It's unlikely. I think the photo album was what they were after—or more accurately, those who took the photos.”

“Were there any leads uncovered we might be able to use?”

“The album was the best hit we had, and another team is working on that. We have exposed, detained, and interrogated some connections in the FBI, however. I suppose you could say your album lead was a huge hit—we busted some interior traitors as a result.”

“But there are more.”

“There are always more. We have some suspicions, but no evidence. Let's just say those under scrutiny are finding themselves sidelined and gradually being driven out of the FBI. The ones determined to stay are under additional scrutiny—they have motivation to stay.”

That I could believe. “And their motives aren't like mine.”

Jake nodded. “Correct. Minimizing the damage they can do has been the Inquisition's first step. Learning who they're connected to is our second. One thing we have established is that none of the culprits are officially involved with the Inquisition. We don't actually think they know about the Inquisition. And if they do, they're misguided on what we do.”

“Your thoughts, Mellisa?”

“I think we're dealing with one of many different hate groups. I suspect a wild wolf attacked someone higher up in their organization, and they want to kill off anyone who might have been associated with the attack. Fenerec aren't the most stable of beings, especially when distressed. If the wolf takes over, they will kill without remorse. Those cases almost always lead to the death of the wolf.”

I winced at the thought of something as large as one of the wolves

attacking somebody. It wouldn't end well for their victim. I'd been able to do a hell of a lot of damage even as a smaller fox, and I'd packed on inches and pounds over the past few months, growing to be almost Jake's match.

Jake had done some growing, too.

"Is Jake at risk of doing this?"

"Not particularly. He's so focused on you he doesn't care about anything else, and his wolf is the same way. Now, if something were to happen to you, then he'd be at high risk. Wolves typically find stability with their mate, and the death of their mate is a common reason a wolf will run wild. Packs help stabilize distressed members of the pack, too." Mellisa shuffled through the papers, located the pictures of the bodies of my first adoptive parents, and frowned. "This is solid evidence the culprits don't know anything about Fenerec. This is systematic. Meant to look like an animal attack. Fenerec—and foxes, like you—are not nearly this clean with the cuts."

"You mean what I did to the London group." It had taken time, but I'd come to terms with having gone on a rampage. "That's what you mean about wild wolves?"

"Precisely. You painted that entire clearing with their blood and left nothing but pieces of them in your wake. Unlike wolves, you had no problem transitioning from your rather violent state to a calmer one."

"She never smelled sick," Jake said, his entire body going tense.

"That's because she's not a Fenerec, hadn't run wild, and wasn't an uncontrolled demon out to murder everyone. She was out to murder anyone who had hurt you, but she showed no real aggression to anyone she thought wasn't associated with your attackers. Of course, she wasn't all there in the head, but she also dealt with denial. She couldn't possibly be a fox—and you couldn't possibly be a wolf."

As I knew it would drive Jake to the edge of his sanity, I looked him in the eyes and said, "I'm still not sold on this whole wolf thing. Remember when it was cold in the winter?"

He raised a brow. “I do, as you kept using me to warm up.”

“You didn’t put on a fur coat for me, not once.”

“My way was better. And anyway, would you have let me stay a wolf long before your insufferably raging hormones—your words, for the record—demanded I be of better use?”

“I am just stating I am suffering from a severe lack of fluffy wolf lately.”

“I’m not that fluffy.”

I showed him my teeth, as wolves talked with their teeth and he would receive the message despite foxes using chitters to express their disdain for something. “I am suffering from a severe lack of fluffy wolf lately.”

“You can shift for her in your room in Japan,” Mellisa said. “They’re aware you both wear fur coats and might transform, so you won’t leave evidence you have to cover up.”

Jake sighed. “If a fluffy wolf is what you want, a fluffy wolf you shall have. But what about my needs? Where is my fluffy fox?”

“You get a fluffy fox at least three times a week, else I get really crabby, you get bitten, and exactly nobody is happy,” I reminded him.

“That seems insufficient. I demand four times a week now at a minimum, and one of those days a week, we need to be snuggled together near a campfire.”

“Maybe we should have the house renovated so we have a fireplace,” I muttered.

“We’d have to buy a new house for a fireplace. It’s not structurally sound for one.” Jake sighed.

“That implies you thought about it.”

“Well, after seeing how much you like fireplaces, I may have asked my dad to check. The house isn’t compatible with fireplaces unless we add on an addition, and our house is not really designed to have an addition without it looking idiotic.” Wrinkling his nose, my husband dug out his phone, tapped at a screen, and showed me a rendering, which proved his point. “I was really

trying, too.”

“We could just sell the house and get a house with a fireplace.”

“I’m game for that. Mellisa?”

“It would be good for you. Karma won’t have any of the negative memories associated with the new home, and neither would you. Amelia? Feel like house hunting before you get so bored you want to vomit?”

“I ran out of things to do,” the Fenerec admitted. “I have trouble living in houses, but I do like looking for them. Which state?”

I eyed Jake. “Somewhere near a mountain?”

“On or near a mountain. Get Inquisition clearance for the area before setting us up for crippling disappointment. Karma really likes mountains. I’ll text you with our tentative budget, as I’d rather not lose a day or two battling with Karma over it.”

I hadn’t known how much I liked mountains until we’d roamed a while, but I refused to be ashamed of it. “Maybe the west coast? They have big mountains. I agree with excluding me from the budget issues. I’m still having problems processing that memory lapse.”

“It’s fine, Karma,” Mellisa said. “I know it bothers you, but there are sound psychological reasons why you’re suffering from a memory lapse. Just focus on what you’d like in a home and communicate that to Jake. He can handle the financial elements, and the Inquisition will probably offer financial assistance, especially considering the circumstances.”

I could work with that, so I nodded.

Jake grinned at Mellisa and Amelia. “Nothing makes her happier than deep snow and the cold, it’s true. Her fox likes it, too.”

“That definitely supports her coming from Tibet. They have plentiful snow and tall mountains. I’ll see what I can do.” Amelia bounced off and left our suite.

“On that happy note, I’ll leave you two to continue investigating. I’ll get on the phone with someone in the Inquisition and see if I can find out more

about the murders associated with the Henry case. I have my doubts, but I might be able to get a better task force assigned to that work now that we're beginning to put together facts. I'll also have them search for any cases similar. Maybe we'll come up with something new."

We could only hope. "Do you think we're ever going to get to the bottom of this case, Mellisa?"

"We will."

"Why are you so confident?"

"Even smart criminals make mistakes, and their key mistake was choosing to continue to pursue you. First, they now have to contend with Jake—a Jake who has almost lost you twice now. And while you may still hold a grudge against his parents, they have more bones to pick with them than you do. And that's saying a lot."

"Really." I raised both brows, wondering how—and when—that had happened.

"While Pauline's initial behavior was not appropriate or conducive to a good family environment, she is an Alpha, she has decided you are part of her pack. While she's made more mistakes than most, her pride as an Alpha has been stung. Above that, she is a mother, and these people tried to kill her son. Her status as a mother is going to be a major driving force in her involvement. They turned your ma against you. She will never forgive that, and she will destroy their empire until not even the foundation remains. Once they are identified, your pack will get hunting rights. The problem will disappear."

"Jake?"

My husband shrugged. "She's probably right. If someone even looks at you wrong right now, my wolf is ready to tear them to pieces. The instant someone points a gun at you? I'll be tearing them apart, probably with my bare hands. If I'm in wolf form should this happen? Well, my hands do a lot less damage than my teeth and claws. I'm not nearly as aggressive as my

mother or my father. While I'm classified as a moderate dominant, I have certain submissive tendencies, which mean I realistically won't be taking over any pack."

I considered my husband with interest. "Is submissive another word for lazy? Or perhaps someone who enjoys being pampered? Otherwise, you don't seem all that submissive to me."

"It's why his parents ended up steamrolling him as bad as they did. Everyone assumed Jake is dominant. He's really not. So, when his parents applied pressure, he caved. His nature is one of cooperation rather than control," Mellisa informed me. "As such, he was quite easy for them to push over and control. This was one of the core problems with your relationship. On the surface, Jake appears to be a dominant, so he should be able to withstand such pressure. In reality, he got torn apart because he is not naturally equipped with handling that sort of situation." With a smile, Mellisa got up and dropped a kiss on my husband's brow. "You're a big giant of a softy, and the reality of the situation? You need a great deal of affection to thrive. You're a great deal more aggressive than he'll ever be, Karma, so you'll end up defending him more often than not. Once you're both in a better mental state, I expect you'll take untraditional roles, with you handling the majority of the frontline work, Karma. Jake's always going to fit best with you in a supporting role."

I blinked, stared at Jake, and as the implications of Mellisa's words sank in, my eyes widened. "Jake's submissive?"

My Jake, who got snarly whenever anyone entered his turf or he thought someone would interfere with us again? Him? Submissive?

Jake took one look at my face and laughed. "You look completely shell shocked. It makes sense. She's been talking to me about it because my parents raised me to be dominant, but the reality is, I'm not nearly as dominant as they would like me to be. As I was incorrectly ranked, I have a lot of habits fairly destructive to me she's working on resolving." Then he

smirked and added, “But don’t worry, I will be as dominant as you want in our bedroom. That’s the sort of dominance battle I like.”

“I will rip your intestine out through your big toe,” I warned him.

“That’s the Karma I know and love,” he replied.

SIX



“Do you need some time alone with your new friend?”

OUR FLIGHT ARRIVED WITHOUT INCIDENT, and we were met by a group of guides. I had no idea what I would do with three Fenerec women, but they took startling delight in my existence, focusing on the white tips of my hair and the paleness of my skin. I’d suspected someone had suggested they take a more relaxed approach, something I appreciated. Their open curiosity, especially about my giant of a spouse, amused me.

We made the harrowing journey through the chaos that was Tokyo to arrive at a high-end hotel. Our suite soared over the city, elegant while tiny, especially by American standards. I doubted Jake would fit on the bed, but he’d cope with his feet dangling off the end—or he’d curl around me.

I expected he would indulge in his inclination to trap me next to him while he slept.

I didn’t mind. I appreciated his willingness to serve as my personal furnace.

Rather than enjoy some private time together, we packed six Japanese Inquisition members into the room, and they brought gifts of weapons, body armor, and intel. The fully automatic Glock, the same model as Pauline’s, would go home with me. The firearm was registered in my name, and they’d acquired all the necessary forms for me to take it into China. While I fought the urge to cuddle with it, I failed, pressing the unloaded gun’s barrel to my

cheek. “She’s mine, Jake.”

He’d have to deal with me sleeping with her, cleaning her daily, and heading to the range to become close friends with her. Our hosts had given him one, too, but mine was better. Mine had custom white and black grips, a match for my fur. His had chocolate and gold-colored grips, a match for his fur.

“Do you need some time alone with your new friend?” he teased.

I gave my gun a kiss, returned her to her case, and petted her before putting her away. “I’ll be okay for a while. There’s not going to be a repeat of London, assuming they don’t get a headshot in.”

“We will be going to Shiroishi, where you two can shift to your animal forms. We have found someone who will be able to deceive anyone into believing she is you. We have made arrangements for why your mate will not be with you, Karma-sama,” Aiko, the leader of the Japanese women, said, gesturing to the new itinerary, which had undergone some minor changes since our flight. During the introductions, we’d made an arrangement where we’d all use our first names with the appropriate honorifics, a blend of Japanese and American customs. “Jake-sama will be taken on a special tour of how those in Shiroishi care for the many foxes. You will go pay respects at the shrine. There is a space there where it will be easy to separate you away from watchful eyes. The woman serving as your double will take your place, and Jake-sama will be able to transform to his wolf in one of the buildings used to care for the foxes and sneak out through a passage, which emerges among the fox dens. She will be given your clothes and weapon, although it will not be loaded. She has other tools at her disposal.”

“Thank you, Aiko-san.” I didn’t understand the honorifics the Japanese used, but I’d been promised if I attached -san to the end of any name given to me, it would be acceptable. Nobody had explained why Jake and I were referred to as -sama while we were to use -san, but I assumed it had something to do with our willingness to turn ourselves into targets.

Still, the idea of having someone serve as my double bothered me. “And this double will be safe?”

“Oh, yes. Very safe. She is...” Aiko made a gesture, something I learned meant she lacked a word in English to describe what she meant. “She has power, and she is willing to use her power. They will only wish a gun might work against her. A gun will do nothing against her. She will be safe. She is old, and old things have power.”

“Oh! Like how witches can use glamours to hide things? That sort of power? Is that how she will disguise herself as me?”

“Similar but not the same. Just rest assured she will be safe enough and can take your place for this. These fools will not be able to tell the difference between you two once she is finished. Then you and your mate may hunt them freely while she draws their attention and exposes them. The village will be closed while we are there, to allow time to care for the foxes, of course. We have made a false claim that there was a health concern with them we wish to address.”

“The foxes will be safe?” I asked.

“They shall be as safe as we can make them,” Aiko promised. “They are wise, and they will likely find you both to be quite fascinating. Their village is operated by the Inquisition here. It is a good thing for our witches and our wolves to be close to nature. The tourists fund many things, including their care. We pretend like the village needs the donations, but in reality, it is quite wealthy. It is just dressed up to appear otherwise. You will find Shiroishi is filled with many secrets. Those who are not aware of the village’s secrets tend to visit the shrine and enjoy meeting the foxes without ever knowing they have walked among witches and wolves.”

Jake took his time introducing himself to his new gun, and once he had given it a complete inspection, he returned it to its case. “Do you think this woman’s glamour will be able to trick our targets?”

“Without question,” Aiko confirmed. “We also have good reason to

believe we will lure at least a few of this organization to Shiroishi. We have carefully monitored activities around your itinerary and the intel we have, who you have spoken to, and who they have spoken to. Your FBI was quite helpful with this. We feel we will get at least six of them to come out. Dead is preferred. We have ways of making the dead speak.”

A chill went through me, as there were those within the United States who cultivated power through life and death. Very few sorcerers survived the Inquisition, but some of them could learn secrets from the dead.

I’d been given a short briefing about sorcerers. Outside a very short list of names, the only good sorcerer was a dead one. One of the names had startled me, as the man worked in an emergency room and used the deaths of those who couldn’t be saved to save those who might live with a little help. The numbers didn’t lie.

His ER had the best survival rate in the United States, and so he lived.

“Do you have intel on our potential targets?” I asked, hoping we could get in some education about who we’d be hunting.

Aiko went to the briefcase she had brought with her, retrieved several folders, and returned, somehow managing to juggle the lot, opening one to find a specific sheet. After a moment, she said, “We have six suspects making moves into the general vicinity of Shiroishi since word was spread you were taking a vacation with your mate. All of these individuals are currently positioned permanently in Japan due to their criminal records, which would bar them from easily leaving. They would have to be smuggled elsewhere, as they are on wanted lists. We have been tracking them for quite some time. Until now, however, we haven’t had evidence of their involvement with this organization.”

Six suspects thrilled me. “And we’re cleared to take them all out?”

“Two are involved with child trafficking and continue to slip out of our law enforcement’s grasp. Three are involved with the illegal sex trade. The last one works with violent crime rings here. All are wanted dead or alive, but

we would prefer if they lose all ability to continue their work. This is an opportunity my government cannot afford to ignore.”

While I held no doubt the suspects had longer rap sheets, my fox had heard all she needed; all six of them would leave in buckets. It seemed a pity to waste perfectly good body bags on such filth. “Why don’t you introduce us to our new friends.”

“And that is how Karma says she’s ready to get started with the killing,” Jake announced. “And by friends, the only friends she’s talking about are those she plans on introducing her teeth to. We’ll be fighting over the bodies.”

“You can’t flirt with me right now, Jake,” I informed my husband.

“I wasn’t trying to flirt.”

“Flirt with a purpose,” I scolded. “Accidental flirtation when we’re trying to plan the brutal murders of abusers is not acceptable. You must flirt with deliberate intent.”

Our hosts managed to maintain their professionalism for a few moments before somebody slipped and giggled. The mirth spread, and I covered my inclination to join in the giggling through scowling at my spouse. When all he did was raise a brow at me, I wrinkled my nose at him.

“That makes you look like a pug rather than a self-respecting fox.”

“You will pay,” I informed him.

He smirked. “In any case, we will end up fighting over the bodies. It’s inevitable. My wolf will be highly offended you’re anywhere near them, and his base reaction to anything potentially harming you is generalized destruction. Your fox has similar tendencies, so we’re going to end up squabbling over the bodies until it’s determined there is no way they’re going to bother us again. Aiko-san, you will have witches with us, right?”

“Yes. We will have several powerful witches available should you need help calming your wolf. We are safeguarding the area, and we have numerous staff on hand to clean up the evidence when you’re finished. We

have accepted this is the likeliest result of this expedition. There is also the chance that your stand-in may wish to become involved, Karma-sama. She does not like abusers, especially of this ilk. And if she decides to act, well you will have to cope with your kill being stolen. You will still be credited with the honors deserved for putting yourselves at risk for the sake of our children. But we cannot control her, nor do we want to in this instance.”

I waved my hand in a dismissive gesture. “It’s a group effort. Tell us more about these individuals.”

“They are Normals as far as we can tell. I will refrain from telling you their names. It isn’t important, not for this. If they show up, in a place they have no reason to go, when it’s clearly posted it is closed, they have confirmed their guilt. It is easier to kill a nameless entity burdened with the weight of their sin than humanize those who are undeserving of humanization.”

I loved the way she thought. “I can work with that. Tell me about the first of these assholes, please.”

“The first of these... assholes, as you say, is a male of Asian descent, probably Chinese. He has lived here as a gaikokujin. You may know of the word gaijin. Gaijin can also refer to someone of our descent who is a stranger to us and likely does not mean well. It is, like many things, quite complicated. For our purposes, we consider all these men to be gaijin, even those of Japanese descent. They have transformed themselves into hostile strangers due to their actions.”

I had heard of the term gaijin before, although only in a novel. “I follow. This ties in well with the idea that there may be a larger problem originating from within China.”

“Yes,” Aiko replied, inclining her head. “We have spoken with our colleagues in China, and they have begun unearthing many new leads, all due to your willingness to put yourself at risk. This is a debt we cannot repay.”

“We’re happy to do it. These assholes target kids.” I glanced at my

husband. “Right?”

“Absolutely. We would have been game to help even without our personal involvement. We can’t just sit idle while this filth continues to break apart families. I also owe them some payback for London. You got all the payback last time, so it’s my turn.”

I narrowed my eyes. “If you get shot again, I am not going to be worried about letting you get any payback. And even if you don’t get shot again, you’re going to have to beat me to it, because I need some extra payback.”

Jake shrugged. “Which leads us right back to fighting over the bodies.”

“I’m sure we’ll manage somehow.”

“It might be challenging, but I suppose so.” Jake turned his attention to our hosts. “Aiko-san, do you have photographs of the culprits?”

Aiko eyed the sheet she held. “We have photographs, but I do not know how well versed you are at remembering the fine details that distinguish us. We’ve noticed we tend to lose our American friends in crowds often. They get distracted by something, and then they realize they are not familiar enough with us, and they wander off, accidentally following someone else. It’s amusing, especially now that we are on guard to make sure we don’t lose our guests. But they are all Normal as far as we know, and we will only have witches, wolves, and those with unique scent markers with us.”

“That’ll make it easy for me, although Karma still has trouble distinguishing scents.” Jake frowned.

“They will surely expose themselves for the filth they are,” Aiko replied.

“And until it is time to see this fox refuge?” I asked.

“Enjoy all our home has to offer, Karma-sama. There will always be someone available should you need anything at all, no matter the time of day. We will give you some time to relax and unwind, for you have had a long journey.”

It took almost twenty minutes to go through the dance of everyone leaving, and I let out a gusty sigh as soon as we were alone. “Did you tell

them my favorite gun, Jake?”

“Karma, it’s written right in your file that you would sell your body and soul for my mother’s gun. Our part of the Inquisition probably told them what your favorite weapon is.” Jake smiled, gave me a kiss, and went to the table burdened with papers. “How is our itinerary looking?”

“Like I get to have a snack of Jake for a few hours before we have steak.” I giggled at my favorite joke for my endless drive to enjoy my mate’s company. I double checked our itinerary. “We seem to have arrived here in time for dinner. There’s some sightseeing and shopping listed after dinner. There’s a note I’ll be dressed in a kimono, and I get to take it home with me along with its accessories.”

Jake joined me, and he laughed, as he was scheduled to be fitted for a suit. “Looks like my suit woes will be solved, too. Let’s stick to their plan. If we are where they think we should be and something does happen, everyone is safer.”

I wondered if either one of us would be able to go to a shopping area again without checking over our shoulders for someone with a grudge and a gun. “Snack before or after we review the intel?”

“Snack first, intel second,” he informed me, gracing me with a smile. “We’ll remember our prey better and be more in a mood to dispatch them that way.”



TO MY DISMAY, there was something to Aiko-san’s claim Americans struggled to differentiate Asian features. If in a crowd, I would have no hope of identifying them. That left me with my other senses, the ones that tended to fail me. Between the plane trip and the general excitement, something was off about my sense of smell.

According to my nose, something about Jake's scent had changed, and I couldn't tell what. Rather than study our targets, I spent an entire hour on his lap while he worked around me, sniffing every other second in an attempt to identify the source of the change.

"While I love the extra attention and how cuddly you are right now, I've never seen you quite this determined to stick your nose in my shirt before. Are you feeling okay? If you're catching a cold, we'll get one of those masks the Japanese wear when not feeling well." Jake pulled out one of the papers from our itinerary. "It says we're to ask for a mask if we're feeling unwell, as that's a local custom."

"You smell weird," I complained. "You smell like you, but there's something weird going on."

My husband smiled, put the papers down, and wrapped his arms around me. "All right. What's weird? It could be that we're just spending more time together and that's helping you develop your sense of smell. Maybe I can talk you through it."

"That's the problem," I confessed. "I just don't understand what's different about your scent. My nose acknowledges there's something there, but I don't get it."

Jake took hold of one of my hands and brought it to my nose. "Can you smell your own scent?"

While I rarely paid my own scent much heed, I took sniffs, and I identified the unique smell signature belonging to me. "I smell it. I smell like a fox but different."

"Try to separate all those little scent signatures, as your scent is a combination of various markers. When people say they smell you on me, they're actually smelling one of your underlying scent markers. For Fenerec noses, it's really strong. I'm guessing fox noses pick up more of the overlying scent markers. So, see if you can smell anything like what you're smelling on me on you. You might be starting to be able to smell your marker on me—or

you're learning to identify my scent marker. It could go either way."

As the scent issue had caused us so much grief, I narrowed my eyes, concentrated, and took in short and shallow sniffs to begin with, flooding my nose with my own scent. With the odd undertone I'd smelled in mind, I took deeper breaths to better evaluate my own scent.

Sure enough, I detected the oddity as well, buried deep. "I smell it!"

"Now, does it remind you of a deep and cold winter or the warmth of a cinnamon bun fresh out of the oven?"

I licked my lips at the thought of a cinnamon bun. "It's been a while since we've had those, Jake."

"If they don't have cinnamon buns here, I will find you a treat," he promised.

I settled back into working through identifying the scent, and after a little, I determined it was closer to a deep cold winter. However, it had a vibe, as though someone made a cup of hot chocolate. "It's mostly like cold and winter, but I could be convinced into thinking there's someone also making a cup of hot chocolate with a tiny hint of cinnamon and spice."

"Those are our scent markers. The cold and winter scent is yours, and the hot chocolate with cinnamon and spice is me. You're just not smelling it over the rest of the scents."

My eyes widened. "The cold and winter is me?" Grabbing hold of his hand, I brought it to my face and went to work trying to make sense of the complex scent that I associated with him. Underneath the enticing aroma I associated with him as a male of particular use to me, I could detect a crisp, wintry smell partnered with that hot chocolate. "If that hot chocolate is really you, you smell delicious."

He laughed. "I have the same reaction to your winter scent. It's more like a crisp, candied apple to me. It's caramel with a strong, tart apple scent. That's part of the magic, from what I understand of the situation. The scent is supposed to be appealing to our mate. You're likely naturally wired to pick

up the overlying scents that Fenerec tend to disregard in favor of the underlying scents. You're smelling your marker on you and my marker on me more than the underlying markers. But I am curious what triggered you being able to identify the underlying scents. You haven't even gotten a whiff of the markers until now. It also makes me wonder if your species lacks mating markers. Perhaps your species is not monogamous like mine?"

If my species was more polyamorous in nature, I counted as a misfit. "I don't share well, Jake."

"This is a good thing to me." He hugged me and kissed my temple. "Monogamy is a personal choice. If your species is culturally polyamorous, you don't have to do what your species does solely because that is their culture. I have no idea how much of your decision to be as you are now is from nature or nurture, although I feel there's a lot of nature playing a part. You really don't handle anyone encroaching on your turf well. Neither do I. It's also a possibility that our mating bond is influencing that."

"I was selfish and jealous long before I met you, Jake."

"And your family drilled it into your head, from a young age, that you should only have one partner at a time." Jake sighed, and he shook his head. "Your pa was much more liberal than your ma on that score, though. Your ma wanted you to have one man and one man only your entire life. Your pa didn't."

One day, thinking of my adoptive parents would hurt less. Pa had deserved better, and Ma could rot in some hell.

Pa had always done his best for me, even when I'd been blinded to the reality of the situation.

"Hindsight is ever perfect," I muttered.

For a while, we sat in silence, and I wondered where Jake's thoughts wandered. Mine had worn ruts through the same loop of regret, something Mellisa had promised would ease over time. No matter how resilient I often was, everyone fell sometimes. Everyone struggled.

I'd fallen apart, but according to her, my ability to pick myself up and dust off would prove to be why I emerged stronger for the darkness I had faced and conquered. She thought Jake's struggles had helped me heal.

He needed me to be strong while he battled his personal demons.

I thrived when helping someone else.

That Jake was the someone else who needed to be helped had bothered me until Mellisa had pointed out the entire point of a partnership was to support each other.

One day, Jake would be back to being a rock I could rely on—and climb should I need to reach a high shelf. Until then, I would try my best to be what he needed until he could stand on his own.

“I wish it were. Then we could get to the end of this case without having to use you as bait.”

“Hindsight doesn't work on things before I'd been born, Jake.”

He huffed.

I checked the time. “They expect us to shop and dine soon, so I better receive sufficient affection to convince the Japanese Fenerec we're not going to destroy their country.”

“I don't think we have enough time for that, but I think I can at least spare Tokyo for one night.”

SEVEN



Many wanted to offer thanks.

WHILE DINNER HAD BEEN MARKED on our itinerary, we did not go to a restaurant. Instead, we ventured out into the city. A festival brought Tokyo to life at night, and dressed in a black furisode kimono, I wandered around with Jake, who'd likewise been tossed into a kimono, although his was plainer than mine. I questioned the differences in our attire, but rather than ask, I marveled at the lanterns strung up around the city, the myriad of stalls, and the jovial atmosphere. Aiko served as our guide, and she took us to the best places to view the fireworks, try as much street food as we could stomach, and purchase all the trinkets my heart desired.

There would be proper shopping later, for clothing for both of us and other things, done at a few select shops owned by the families of the Inquisition.

Many wanted to offer thanks, and opening their businesses after hours for us, according to Aiko, went a long way towards balancing the scales.

A little shrine near the stalls offered patrons ofuda, fashioned from either paper, wood, cloth, or metal. A wooden one painted with white, red, and black letters drew my attention. Aiko observed until she determined which ofuda drew my interest. With a gentle laugh, she said, "This is an interesting one, well suited for your spirit. It is both a ward against evil and a plea for the favor of the kitsune." She gestured to the placard nearby, which declared a

price. “It is made of mahogany, and it is meant to protect and to cultivate good luck and prosperity.”

I pulled out the hakoseko I’d been given to carry my money while wearing the kimono, and I eyed the sign, guessed it would be one of the more expensive of the ofuda on offer, and pulled out the appropriate bills. Aiko nodded, and she guided me through making the purchase, translating as needed. The shrine maiden, whom Aiko introduced as a miko of the shrine, was dressed in red and white, and she took the time to explain how I should hang the ofuda in my home along with the steps I needed to take to maintain its sanctity. She wrapped it in cloth and placed it within a box, which she offered to me while bowing.

I returned her bow, accepting the ofuda with both hands.

According to Jake’s scent, the whole process amused him.

When we escaped the shrine, I pondered how to carry my prize. With a smile, Aiko instructed me on how I might store the box in the sleeve of my kimono in such a way it would not escape. To my delight, the method worked. “These are amazing, Jake.”

Chuckling, he nodded in the direction of a nearby food stall. “That one has gyozas. You seem to quite enjoy those.”

It took me a moment to realize he wanted the takoyaki next door but pretended to cater to me. I nodded. “You better get those little balls, too. It wouldn’t do if you starved to death.”

Aiko giggled, and she guided us through the crowd to the food stalls. “Our hosts for the later part of our evening will all be providing some refreshments for your enjoyment as well. Neither of you will starve, I promise. Of course, we are doing this to make it appear as though the shop owners are hosting celebrations to prevent unwanted attention from falling upon us. While the hour is later than typical, anyone who wanders by the shops will believe what their eyes tell them.”

While I wished I understood more about Japanese customs, I accepted her

words at face value. “Thank you, Aiko-san.”

“We are honored to be of service, Karma-sama.” She spared us from the bowing ritual, although I suspected she fought the urge to grace us with one of her deep bows, which she tended to hold long enough my back ached in sympathy. “There are over four thousand shrines and temples in Tokyo, and every one serves a purpose. The one you acquired your ofuda from is small. It is more general in nature, and it is meant to blend our customs with the interests of tourists. What you selected is something guests to our country would typically pass by in favor of other trinkets or souvenirs.”

As the Japanese had a strong dislike of when people walked and ate, we stood between the two stalls to enjoy our snack. Once we finished, Aiko guided us to another nearby shrine, one popular with the tourists. Like the smaller shrine, there were ofuda available for sale, but other trinkets, including luck cats, were the star of the show. A painting of a nine-tailed kitsune waited above the ofuda, and according to the placard beneath it, it cost several hundred dollars once I converted the currency.

I stared at the painting, which appeared to be on some form of silky cloth, and then I turned my gaze to my husband and waited.

Jake eyed me, considered the painting, and sighed. “I have no idea how we’re going to get that home without damaging it, Karma.”

Aiko giggled, and she said, “We can take care of that matter with little difficulty.”

Before I could begin the dance of paying for the piece, Jake had his wallet out, and he approached one of the miko, gesturing to the painting I liked. Aiko assisted him with the sale, and like my ofuda, they packaged the painting and the wooden board it was mounted on in a box. Jake adopted the same custom of accepting the item with a bow and both hands.

Unlike my first prize, the painting wouldn’t fit into a sleeve, but Aiko solved the problem with her phone, summoning someone from the Inquisition to take our purchase to our hotel.

“Karma enjoys seeing the shops, especially jewelry and trinkets,” my husband informed our guide.

I did? Puzzled, I canted my head to the side. Rather than argue with him, I considered why he might want to look at jewelry.

Then I remembered.

London.

We’d gone shopping for rings in London.

Criminals enjoyed patterns, and sometimes, playing the bait meant catering to the expectations of those criminals. “We could look for a new set of rings, Jake. We can get a new set of rings every time we go to a new country.”

“That could get expensive quickly, Karma.”

I shrugged. “We can afford it. It’s a meaningful but small way of gathering things of emotional value when abroad.”

Jake huffed at me. “I couldn’t argue with that even if I wanted to.”

“While traditional Japanese ceremonies do not use rings, there are stores that sell them,” Aiko informed us, and after a few moments of thought, she gestured towards one of the nearby streets, which featured a collection of shops and stalls. “Our traditional custom is called san san ku du. It means three, three, and nine, the principles of the marriage ceremony. One of the threes represents the bride and groom and their parents, three couples joining together in the ceremony. The next three represents the sins or flaws of hatred, passion, and ignorance. The point of the ceremony is to provide freedom from those sins or flaws as they join in marriage. The ceremony uses sakazuki cups, from which the three couples drink sake.”

“That sounds so much nicer than our ceremonies,” I admitted.

Aiko offered a little bow. “I would be pleased to show you one of the stores specializing in such ceremonies. I realize that you do not have familial colors in the United States, so Jake-sama can choose his familial colors or something that appeals to his family’s nature, should you wish to have

ceremonial garb to take home with you.”

“We’d like that,” Jake replied before I had a chance to make use of my saddest eyes on him. “It can be a new beginning for us, Karma.”

Every day could be a new beginning for us, if we allowed it. Rather than say that, I bobbed my head and offered Aiko a short and brief bow. “We would be honored if you showed us, Aiko-san.”

“Please follow me.”



LIKE TWO CHILDREN set loose in a candy store with unlimited money, Jake and I rampaged through the shop dedicated to Japanese marriage ceremonies. We couldn’t decide on which sakazuki we liked best, so we got one set each. In what surely counted as some offense, I picked Jake’s attire. He picked mine, and to my amusement, he’d found a white kimono with a silvery kitsune theme, although I believed the decorations were more meant to protect from the wily ways of fox demons rather than celebrate them.

The shop also sold ceremonial tea sets, of which we bought three, as we both fell hard for the elegant designs.

“Yesterday, I had respected money,” my husband informed me in a whisper while Aiko and the couple operating the shop discussed our needs and purpose in raiding the store. “Today? I find money has no value and we should spend more of it.”

“We’re going to have to come back to Japan and do a proper ceremony here.”

In the Japanese tradition, we would have our parents take part, and my statement carried the weight of my hope I could have a future with parents in them.

I missed my pa, and all I had left of my ma were quiet regrets that time

would dull until nothing but memories remained.

“We can do that once this mess is all over,” Jake promised, and he leaned over to kiss my temple. “I suspect once the Chinese find out what we’re doing here, they’re going to join the party. We’re going to need a new house just to have extra rooms to display our ceremonial items. This stuff is too gorgeous to just shove in a closet.”

I dug out my phone, took a few photos of what we were up to, and texted them to Mellisa, along with the hint we’d need a larger house to hold our new purchases.

My phone rang, and I stepped to the side, as I’d learned the Japanese did not approve of phone calls being held openly. “I’m in a store, Mellisa.”

“Do you need us to come rescue you?”

I laughed. “No. We’re having a good time. How are you and Amelia doing?”

“We’re also having a good time. We’re going to be watching the fireworks in a few minutes. Our guide has fed us, so we’re about to burst. We also met your stand-in and her mate.”

“How close of a double is she?”

“She’s you, Karma. She’s you with a few extra inches, a more formal personality, and a tendency to view others as inferior. She’s you right down to your white tips in your black hair. Her mate? He’s also you, but he’s closer to Jake in height. If they aren’t members of your biological family, I’ll eat my slippers. Their auras are like yours, too, although his is more attuned with water than with earth. They’re old and powerful, Karma. The very ground they walk upon rejoices in their presence. If our targets show up, the very Earth will rise against them.”

Well, that changed my evening. If the woman was a clone of me but a little taller, our prey would struggle to differentiate us. “And their scent?”

“They do not carry mating markers, but they definitely reek of fox. Her voice is higher in pitch and more melodious than yours, so she’ll have to stay

quiet to pull off the ruse, but I understand what our hosts meant during our briefing.”

Amelia and Mellisa had been carted off to have their own briefing, leaving us to receive gifts of firearms and meaningful work. Interesting. “Are they still around?”

“They are. They are enjoying a nearby food stall. She calls him her mate, but I get the feeling they are friends who happen to sleep together rather than mates. And they have intercourse for the purpose of having children rather than pleasure, as far as I can tell. They don’t seem all that interested in sexual relationships. They are not like you and Jake are mates. I feel they could separate at any time with no harm done to either side. They had a different term for their relationship, but it’s in a language I don’t understand, and our guide didn’t know the translation for it.”

“Find out what you can,” I requested. “You may mention we’re buying ceremonial goods to test their reactions.”

Mellisa chuckled. “I can do that for you. I’ll swing by your room in the morning so we can discuss this further.”

“Sounds good.” I hung up and stowed my phone before rejoining Jake. I pointed at the collection of decorative fans on the walls, displayed for the world to see. “We should get a pair of those, too.”

“No problems?” Jake asked.

“It seems the women of my line are short while the men are giants. Mellisa has seen two of my clones, and unless the woman speaks, she’ll easily be mistaken to be me. She’s a little taller than I am, but not by much. The man is almost as tall as you are.”

After gracing me with a leer, he said, “It seems your interest in giants may be genetic.”

“Why do you think they were introduced to Mellisa and Amelia first?” I asked, unable to keep my voice from wavering.

“Mellisa can tell how badly you’ll probably react to them and buffer you

if needed. You've been under a lot of psychological strain lately, and she doesn't want you to break because of potential problems. So, my guess is the Inquisition is having her evaluate them before they meet you." Jake shrugged. "It's not an unreasonable stance to take. I did notice they'd split us up, and it makes sense as to why. Mellisa and Amelia are here as security and to keep us functioning. We're here to be bait and get as far into breaking this group into as many pieces as we possibly can. That Mellisa informed you they're here and they're like we thought, appearing to be genetic duplicates of you, means she has found them either to her liking or safe enough to expose you to."

"What do you think it means that they came out here? For her to serve as bait?"

"I think you're a loved child who was hidden or stolen. That behavior is not the behavior of a family who discarded a child for no good reason."

Not like Ma. I would need more time than I had to work my way through those feelings, so I inhaled, nodded, and lifted my chin. "Six fans, then. Two for us, two for your parents, and two for members of my biological family, who might fill the role even if I don't have living parents."

"It's a start," Jake replied, and he eyed the selection of fans, pointing at several matching sets. "And even if it doesn't work out, we can display them as a memento of what might have been if life were a little more kind and a lot more fair."



AS PROMISED, we were taken to a variety of different shops owned by members of the Inquisition. We spent almost two hours at each one, where we did the equivalent of purchase entire new wardrobes for each other. We even found a new set of wedding rings along with a new engagement ring for

me, featuring a mix of clear and black diamonds. The price tag stunned me, but Jake took over, delighting in the find and insisting I wear the new one for our adventure through Asia.

He walked away with six new suits, all of which fit him with minor adjustments needed, which were done on the spot. He also found new shoes.

I walked away with everything I might need to live a long and happy life, including a new set of lotus flower body care products, enough hot cocoa to please my fox for at least a month, a small pair of guardian statuettes featuring dragons, and a jade carving of a nine-tailed kitsune. Jake received a jade carving of a prowling wolf, which amused me.

I wondered how long our hosts had been planning for our arrival for them to have made so many preparations.

I'd been correct in my general guess about the stature of Asian men, which had resulted in very little Jake could purchase in regular stores. He found the whole thing amusing, laughing about it whenever he was certain Aiko or another of our hosts couldn't catch him.

By the time we returned to our hotel, it was the wee hours of the morning, and we'd only get a few hours of sleep before we geared up and headed to the shrine, where I would switch places with someone probably from my biological family.

I'd endured so many lies I harbored more than a few doubts.

I passed out the instant I flopped on to the bed, and it took Jake waving coffee under my nose to get me on the move. While we'd both be shapeshifting upon arrival, the Inquisition provided bulletproof gear. Unless they went for a head shot, we'd have good odds of surviving anything our targets threw our way.

"Hey, Karma?" Jake asked while we did our final checks.

I checked my gun for the fourth time, and once satisfied everything was in working order, I slipped it into the holster I'd hide under a lightweight coat. "What is it?"

“Are you convinced we’re not dead yet?”

Later, my husband would pay. “Ask me after we’re back from the shrine,” I instructed.

He snickered, shot his smuggest smirk my way, and headed for the door. “Not only am I going to ask you, I’m going to play at being a defenseless, injured wolf who couldn’t possibly do anything at all unless my vixen puts her teeth to good use.”

“James Thomas, you’re the worst!”

He smirked at me. “Only if you don’t bite me like you mean it, Karma.”

EIGHT



“Have I smelled this bad the whole time?”

A SAD TRUTH of the world smacked me in the nose.

Foxes reeked.

With wide eyes, I stared at my husband, horrified over the possibility I’d been torturing him and everyone around us with a rather pungent odor. How could anyone stand being in the same building with me, let alone the same room? Of all the obstacles we’d faced, would the natural funk of fox be what did us in?

“What’s wrong?”

Whimpering, I nodded my head at the hundreds of adorable foxes, all of them stinking to high heaven while charming us with their excitement and plush coats. “Have I smelled this bad the whole time?”

Jake’s shoulders shook, and he bowed his head. While he made a valiant effort, a choked laugh escaped him. “You don’t smell like a regular fox, Karma.”

I spent an inappropriate amount of time sniffing my arm in search of the scent markers, indicating I might have a severe stench problem. “Are you sure?”

While I struggled to determine if I’d been torturing everyone the whole time, Jake crouched to introduce himself to the many foxes scampering around. As the shrine tried to make sure they received an appropriate diet,

he'd been given a bowl of meat, which he fed to the eager animals. Undeterred by the smell, he managed to pet a few of them, who basked in being shown a scrap of attention.

A few of the braver animals came up to me and stared up at me with adoring eyes. While the fox in me struggled to come to terms with the domesticated state of our mundane counterpart, I joined Jake in introducing myself to them.

"I am sure that you don't smell like these foxes. You have a faint but pleasant musk that indicates there's something fox about you, but it's a pleasant undertone. For the most part, I get crisp apple from you, as does Amelia."

Our friend was nearby, kitted and ready to serve as judge and jury for any Greenwich operators who might show up to rain on our parade. From the few signals I'd caught from the Inquisition members infesting the shrine, at least three of our targets had been spotted.

I left the identification for those qualified for the work and did my job, which involved pretending to be oblivious, thus the perfect bait. "I'm not going to be happy if I can't identify who I need to shoot, Jake."

"You're going to be a fox starting within five minutes. Aiko just gave me the signal we should go explore the shrine and other buildings." Jake finished feeding the animals and headed over to the building where the shrine's attendants fed the furred residents. As planned, he went inside to be taken on a tour while I explored the actual shrine itself, which was dedicated to all things fox. A miko monitored the shrine, and once one of the witches outside signaled, she led me deeper inside the building under the guise of showing me a more private section of the building.

We were met by a woman with my face, and I doubted I'd ever adapt to having the equivalent of a twin. We considered each other with open scrutiny. Someone had done a good job of styling our hair to be the same; even if hers was longer, the bun would hide the extra length. As planned, we

wore the same clothes, which added to the surreal nature of the meeting.

“When you shift, concentrate and focus on how you wish for stealth,” the woman instructed. “It will help you be small, like our natural kin. Your...” With a puzzled expression, she nodded in the direction of the auxiliary building I’d left Jake to tour as part of our ruse.

“Mate,” I supplied. “Wolves like him form bonds with their partner, who they call their mate.” As I’d finally learned how to identify the smell, I held out my arm. “If you sniff carefully, ignoring the predominant scents, you will smell something that is spicy, like cinnamon and hot chocolate. That’s my mate’s scent marker. Mine is a crisper smell, a little sweet, like an apple.”

While her expression remained puzzled, she sniffed at my arm. “Yes, I do smell it. A mild undertone, but present. The magic of it is strong and runs deep, however, like the roots of a tree or a mountain. As long as this pleases you, then it pleases me.”

“Why wouldn’t it please me?” Jake and I still had a long way to go, but we would get to where we were going eventually, step by painful step.

Assuming, of course, I didn’t stink us out of having a relationship.

“Some of us are born with those tendencies. I am not one of them, but your father is. He is a most annoying creature, often overcome with unbecoming amounts of sentiment. Still, he serves some use, so I keep him around. I also serve some use for him, so he keeps me around. You must have inherited his nature.”

Well, that would color things for me for a while. Without the possibility of her being my mother being broached yesterday, I would have struggled with the concept. Still, until I asked, I wouldn’t learn the truth. “Are you my mother?”

“I have that honor, although I have not yet earned being called such. This should begin the process of reversing past but necessary evils.” With her eyes narrowing, she gestured to an adjacent room blocked off with a shoji screen. “You will become your fox in there, and when you are finished, you will

leave the shrine through a small flap. It is a den for some of the foxes and those who are in need of warmth and comfort in their old age. We are perceived to be protectors of the little ones, so they will not mind your passage. We will have time to discuss more. Your role is to observe and to understand us, myself and your father, better. This should be a simple enough working. They are only five.” Straightening, she offered the sort of smile I expected from a serial killer about to begin her hunt. “There will be time enough for talking soon enough. Your firearm, if you do not object to loaning it to me?”

I reached into my jacket, retrieved my Glock, and offered it to her. A thousand questions bothered me, but one stood out among the others, and would haunt me until I asked. “Was I stolen?”

She sighed, and she stowed my weapon in her holster, hiding it beneath the same coat I wore. “Yes and no. Our chance to keep you was stolen from us, but we sent you to safety because an opportunity allowed for us to do so. You had been born last, late and weak, and our enemies believed you would die of your own accord and did not slay you. The rest of your litter perished within a few hours of birth. As though knowing what your fate may be, you stayed within my womb as long as you could. It cost you, but you survived, somehow.”

That changed a lot, and having aspired to work in CARD for so long, I believed her. I’d heard her anguish in the voices of mothers struggling to cope with the loss of their child before. “They left me alive so you might watch me die?”

A new fury roused, one that erased the grief I still harbored, one that burned deep within my bones and would smolder until I found every one of the bastards behind the Greenwich case and ripped the life from their limbs and painted the world with their blood. There wouldn’t be enough left of them to give to my parents and the rest of my family—assuming any still lived.

I would not ask. When the woman was ready, she would tell me—and we would figure out how we would share the world together, be it as mother and daughter or as uncomfortable strangers struggling to find balance and peace.

Peace would be a long time coming, but it would come. I would see to it, and I would make certain that the woman who'd brought me into the world might enjoy those days.

I waited, maintaining eye contact while wondering how our lives would change.

“Your aunt sacrificed her life so that you might live. I fed you for the first time, although not for as long as I wished, and my sister took you and fled from our mountains.” Her eyes unfocused, and I wondered what hellish memory she relived. After a few moments, she shook her head. “She took you to someone. I never learned who, but that person somehow got you to the United States in safety. My sister made it to the ocean, and she sent you away. They were too late to prevent your flight abroad, but my sister stood her ground until her last breath. They brought her body, battered beyond any chance of life, hoping it would be what broke us.”

I understood far better than she would appreciate about being broken.

Her eyes hardened, and she carried herself with rigid determination. “They could not break us then, and they will not break us now. When we made our escape, the only thing I took from our mountains is the small shrine I made to her, and I thank her every morning and night for her sacrifice. For many years, I wondered and waited. I did not learn more of you until you were attacked in London, and as always, we were unable to act. But when their gaze turned on you, they lowered their guard, allowing us to escape. It is now time for us to take back all we've lost. The story is as long as it is dark, but know this: those who die today have earned their fate.”

I wondered who had held her hostage—and how. Aiko believed my mother to be old and with power. What could contain her? I acknowledged my ignorance, although I would wait to address it.

One day, I would find the courage to ask.

Uncertain of what to say, I did the one thing I could. I accepted her words as truth, nodded to acknowledge her, and slipped behind the shoji screen to shift. I heeded her advice of how I might better disguise myself among the mundane animals. While simple, her method worked, although I struggled to fit through the flap and beat most of the males in height. Jake stood no chance of hiding among the foxes, and I spotted him sulking in some of the deeper shadows beneath the neighboring building.

As there were numerous marbled foxes among the animals living at the shrine, I trotted over without bothering to mask my presence, slid under the structure, and made myself at home between Jake's front paws. If he noticed my smaller size, he paid it no mind. He relaxed, and as he often did when we both wore our fur coats, he settled in to groom me from nose to tail. Our position gave us a good view of the shrine and the yard in front of it with a single tree obstructing our view. In my fox form, the stench threatened to do me in, and to express my discontent, I issued a soft chitter and covered my nose with my paws.

Jake huffed and gave the back of my neck a nip before situating my fur to his liking.

My mother must have watched me somehow, as when she emerged from the shrine, she'd adopted my stride and moved with the wariness of an FBI agent expecting trouble. Mellisa had commented on my tendency to move like I remained on duty, but as I showed no other symptoms of distress or conditioning, she'd deprioritized it in favor of more pressing concerns.

Jake adjusted his pose, wrapped his front paws around me, and issued the softest of growls.

The foxes scattered and went into hiding under the various buildings, with the majority of them cramming under ours, resulting in a press of furry, stinky bodies and the low cries of foxes in distress.

Something set my fur on end, as though a low static charge zipped

throughout the sanctuary.

I understood, then, what Aiko had meant about the very Earth rising up should anything happen to my mother. The ground quivered, and I recognized the sensation as anticipation.

The Earth hunted with my mother, heeding her call.

A second sensation played across my skin, and I tilted my head, pondering what it might be. In a way, it reminded me of a gently flowing stream with its waters caressing me, although it lacked the sense it would drown me. Flattening my ears, I crowded near Jake and displayed my teeth.

After almost losing so much, no power would violate my territory again.

An Asian man stepped out through the trees, and he came armed with a Desert Eagle rather than the smaller weapons used in London to take me and injure Jake. The need to tear him to shreds stirred, similar to how a pebble ushered in a rockslide. Before I could creep forward and put my teeth to use, Jake snagged me by the scruff, and he enforced his demand through lifting a paw and applying pressure to my back.

If I wanted to get to the bastard, I'd have to fight Jake like I meant it. Chittering, I struggled to twist my head around so I could land a bite.

He overpowered me and issued a growl I'd learned indicated he would give me a run for my money if I challenged him. I snapped my teeth a few times to indicate I'd deal with him later, but I stayed put.

My mother reached into her coat for my gun, and she even went through the motions of pointing the weapon, although she clutched the grip in such a way no finger came anywhere near the trigger. Appalled over her complete lack of etiquette or grace with my firearm, I groaned and lowered my head, although I kept a close eye on her.

The ground shook, and the rip of stone breaking apart drowned out every other sound. A woman shrieked and someone else screamed. In the time it took for me to suck in a breath, a jagged cone of stone pierced through my mother's victim. She gestured with my firearm, and thin rods of rock

exploded from the man's body.

Ew. The foxes crowded closer, and they whined and whimpered their distress. As I couldn't blame them for being frightened, I took the time to groom their faces to comfort them.

Jake wisely kept his wolf breath to himself.

The ground shook again, and my mother repeated the gesture with my firearm.

I could only assume she'd spotted another victim to tear apart with her magic.

However much I longed to join the fray, not that there was much of a fight, I understood why I needed to remain sheltered beneath the auxiliary building and wait. If even half of what my mother had told me was true, she had an entire lifetime of vengeance to work out of her system. With a group like Greenwich, if she waited for justice to be served on a platter in court, her day would never come.

As always, I had more questions than answers. I found some comfort in knowing something new about my past. For better or worse, as far as I could tell, I had been a wanted child. That my survival had been a mix of fortune and sacrifice bothered me.

Who had named me Karma?

More importantly, why?

Had my mother named me? Had my aunt, who had sacrificed her life so I might live? Had the person who'd taken me overseas been responsible for my naming and odd birth certificate?

Only time would tell.

NINE



“My ma turned out to be as much of a monster as them.”

FIVE ASIAN MEN died at my mother’s hands, and my father called water with his magic to erase the blood. The Inquisition took care of the bodies, giving them to Mellisa to burn to nothing but ash and bone. She did her work in the shrine where the foxes denned, and an air witch captured the smoke and bottled it.

The shrine’s miko performed a ritual over the glass vessel, tied an ofuda around the neck, and offered it to my mother with a low, deep bow.

My mother took it with both hands, returning the bow for the same depth and length, and after some time of contemplation, she passed it to my father.

Jake and I remained in our animal forms, and I stayed close to his side with an entourage of foxes, who crammed close in their effort to stay in contact. Every now and then, Jake groomed my ears, and knowing the evils of wolf breath, he made a point of licking my nose.

My attempt to nip him resulted in more wolf breath along with a hefty dose of slobber. I slinked off to change back to human, and Aiko tended to me, helping me dress and confirming I hadn’t come to any harm.

When I returned to the shrine, my mate had vanished off somewhere along with the foxes, and my parents spoke with Mellisa and Amelia. “Did you get them all?”

“Of the ones who showed,” my mother replied. “None were worth

keeping alive. They were no more than ignorant servants of the real men we hunt, so don't worry about if knowledge perished with them. When we spoke to the Inquisitors, they promised the families of their victims would be given closure, and that it was better to kill them swiftly. I have ways of keeping prey alive, especially now that we have left our mountains. But it is better this way. If I could have spent hours making them suffer, I would have—and I would have enjoyed it.”

That I understood, having seen such things plenty of times in the violent crimes division. Unlike most of the families struggling with tragedy, I determined my mother meant every word she spoke, and remorse was not a word included in her personal dictionary.

I could accept her ruthlessness and thirst for blood and revenge. I struggled to comprehend how long she had suffered at their hands, and I doubted I would ever understand.

Considering the pair through narrowed eyes, I asked, “Does this mountain do something to your magic?”

My mother smiled. “You're perceptive. Good. Yes. There are many wards there, much like the ones here, but far older and far more potent, meant to keep our powers quiet when we are in our sanctuary. Our sanctuary ultimately became a prison. It has been a prison for many decades now. My sister was the first to escape it since our imprisonment, taking you with her. You are the first of us to have lived somewhere other than our sanctuary for over a hundred years. Our enemy is old and tireless. Relentless. They seek power, but they cannot claim it for themselves. And they wish to use us to claim that power, but we have stood steadfast despite the prices we have paid.” My mother made a soft sound, and she regarded my father with a solemn expression.

He offered the faintest of smiles, and he reached out to touch my mother's cheek. “You are the first surviving child of our people in over a hundred and fifty years. Every other litter was killed. We always tried our

best to hide that we tried to continue our kind, but without fail, they would show up within hours of birth and slaughter our hope for the future again. They slipped with you—and you gave us hope. They have also guaranteed their deaths. Those of us left know you are alive and well, and that you have defied them numerous times now. The winds whispered of the deaths at your hands, and the Earth rejoiced at the spilling of our enemies' blood. You have struck blows to them without knowing the monster you fight.”

“They targeted children,” I informed him. “That was all I needed to know. That one of the children was me only made it a little more personal.”

Jake stepped into the shrine, and he wore one of his new suits, a change from the protective gear we'd arrived in. With one of his quiet smiles, he stepped to my side, leaned over to kiss my temple, and placed his hand on my back. I questioned that part of his gesture, as he normally would have tucked me close in a possessive display. Once back to our room and in private, I would ask him about the change, although I worried he wanted to come across as more welcoming to my parents.

“Introduce us?” my father asked, and to my amusement, I realized he stood less than an inch shorter than Jake.

“This is Jake. He's a wolf, and if he comes near you as a wolf, his breath smells vile.” I reached around, snagged Jake's hand, and moved it to the appropriate place, enabling him to tuck me close at his whim. “Wolves are high maintenance, require daily care, but are typically excellent father material.”

With one of his soft huffs, Jake turned me, picked me up, and waited for me to attach to him before saying, “Have you been briefed about Karma's adoptive parents?”

“Yes. The woman had joined forces with our prey, but our daughter proved to be more than they could handle. We were also informed you have both had some abuses by members of your species, but it has been resolved.”

As Jake had placed me where I could rest my head on his shoulder, I did

so. “My ma turned out to be as much of a monster as them, but my pa was a good man.”

“One of them had to be to instill your level of integrity,” my mother acknowledged. “I am grateful to your pa, as you call him. The other? May she pay for her sins in the next life.”

Karma, the balancing of the scales. “Did you name me?”

“No, we didn’t. I saw the papers, and that would have been my sister’s doing, a web of lies meant to keep you safe. The name she chose for you is a strong one, and we see no need to take what has become yours to follow old traditions and beliefs. Should you want, once our sanctuary is made safe, we can teach you of the family you never knew you had.”

“I’d like that. I doubt I’ll make a good Tibetan, though.”

“You are perfect as you are, alive and well.” My mother eyed Jake, and after a moment, she smirked. “It seems you enjoy your wolf’s company as well.”

Jake coughed, and I grinned at the strained sound. “We have some questions about my species, as we are hesitant to have children without knowing if I can shift or anything like that.”

“I shifted daily with you for the first thirteen months of pregnancy.”

My eyes widened. “The first thirteen months of pregnancy?”

How long had her pregnancy been? How had she survived at least thirteen months?

“Right. Humans only are pregnant for a few months. Eight?” She stared at my father, who shrugged. “Something like that.”

“It’s technically nine, with two weeks prior to conception counting as part of the time period. They count the months based on the start of a woman’s cycle,” Mellisa said, coming to our rescue. “We had concerns, especially as Karma had an unborn twin surgically removed from her side.”

Both of my parents made a gesture, which concluded with them pressing their palm to the center of their chest, and they bowed their heads.

My mother recovered first. “Our litters always lose one or two of the kits.”

My father sighed, went to my mother, and rested his hand on her shoulder. “We are the last of our kind who can even try for litters. The other pairs lose all of the litters, because we are not...”

With a sickening feeling in my chest, I realized that they implied I was inbred in some fashion, although I’d learned enough from my genetic testing to have suspected that was the case.

“Diverse,” I supplied. “You’re too closely related.”

“Yes and no. Your father and I were brought into the world long ago, when our lines were varied. But we are, well, still very similar even though we do not share parentage. I came from the clan of the land, he came from the clan of the sea. To form an alliance, we were joined for all eternity, destined to bring children into the world. But, yes. Everyone else is more closely related, and as such, they are not compatible. There are no more clans, no more diversity, no more meetings of magic. They killed off as many as they could until only we remained along with a scattering of children of the same clan, too closely related to have a hope of children.”

I read between the lines; the killers had come, time and time again, and killed their children, crumbling their hopes for the future at the same time.

“Who are they? What name do you know them by?” I asked. “We call them the Greenwich Group.”

“They call themselves Yamāntaka, after an old god. They seek to destroy death, obtaining eternal life for themselves while devouring the world and controlling it for their purposes. They are an abomination. They wish to use us as a front for the people they wish to control—to present us as the proof of eternal youth.” My mother’s eyes turned hard. “They are not wrong, but we do not live to control or to defy death. We saw when the world was young, we witnessed the rise of early man and how they fell, only to rise again to become humanity. For your sake, I hope your wolf is long-lived, for you

endure long beyond mortal man.”

“Fenerec can live for thousands of years,” Jake stated, and something about his subdued tone bothered me. “But we are rarely stable for that long. We do not die from aging, although we can be killed.”

“Much like us, then. Perhaps you are the Earth’s gift to my daughter, so that when we came from our mountains after so long, she would have a place.” After a moment, my mother nodded her satisfaction. “The land sings that you are here with her. The seas?” she asked my father.

“The seas are calm.”

I wondered what that meant, but the answer seemed to satisfy my mother. While I had questions, I maintained my silence.

It would take longer than we had for me to work through the turbulent emotions to figure out which one to ask first. Who was I?

No. What was I? What manner of beings had hidden in the mountains of Tibet for hundreds upon hundreds of years, unseen by humanity?

My people, my kind as my mother phrased it, seemed to be an old secret, ancient before mankind had taken their first steps.

Aiko approached and bowed before saying, “We have prepared a place where you can be purified, change your clothes, and enjoy a meal. Please allow us the honor of handling the rest of the details here.”

“The ash and bones should be placed within a wooden box, warded with your most potent of charms, and left upon a beach within distance of the high tide,” my mother instructed. “You honor us.”

“And you honor us,” Aiko replied, and the miko began the process of gathering what remained of the five men. “You have given us hope of a future with peace, and there is no way to repay that.”

“And you have given us a future with our child,” my mother replied. “I am certain we are equal to the mutual burdens we will carry for as long as we draw breath. This burden will not be a difficult one, shouldered with joy rather than remorse.”

I understood, then, the significance of Aiko's bow.

There were no words capable of conveying the woman's depth of gratitude.



JAKE FASCINATED MY FATHER. Then, after a comment from my mother, I realized he'd been the sole giant of his people, finally meeting someone he could look in the eyes without lowering his head. Once we reached the estate, owned by a member of the Inquisition, both men became their animals, posturing for each other.

As a wolf, Jake towered over my father. Unwilling to be left out of the party, I shifted as well, pleased I'd grown enough as a fox to be almost the match of my mate in size.

Between the three of us, we transformed the garden into a zoo.

My mother circled me, and she smiled. "Your conformity is perfect. Your chest is the right width, your legs are long without being brittle, and your ears are appropriately distanced. Good. It makes more sense now why they left you to die on your own. To their eyes, you would have been different. At birth, you were smaller than your littermates by half, and you showed your adulthood conformity—something the rest of the litter had not." My mother crouched beside me, and she reached out, placing her hand on the top of my head. When I did not protest, she took a single tentative stroke. "Your fur is silkier than ours. Unlike us, your health has not suffered."

Well, it had, but Jake had done wonders getting me back into shape and making sure I stayed there. To indicate he held some responsibility, I nuzzled my mate. Jake gave me a little nip and stretched out on the ground, resting his head on his paws. I joined him, snuggling into his plush coat.

A rather amused Amelia came over and crouched beside me. "If you

don't mind, we do have a lot of questions, ma'am."

"Please, call me Amrita. He is Rabten. I know we did not have time to properly introduce ourselves. You are Amelia. You are a wolf?"

"I'm a wolf," Amelia confirmed. "Is it normal for your women to be rather energetic towards their partners?"

Jake huffed his amusement, and I heaved a sigh and leveled a baleful glare at our friend.

"We are aggressive, yes. Before our imprisonment, our women outnumbered our men twenty to one, and there was fierce competition for a partner. The men can be quite reluctant, although once they decide they wish for a litter, it is our way for him to take control of the situation. When trying for a litter, we women instigate until our partner decides to accept our offer, after which it is his turn. He will do as he must until a litter is confirmed on the way. It is a rather lengthy process."

Well, that explained a lot, and I expected it would take a great deal of creativity for us to counter my base instincts. Heaving a sigh, I turned my stare on Jake.

"It is normal for Karma to be quite docile sometimes, then?"

"Oh, yes. That's quite normal. We are taught how to secure a litter from an early age, as there is nothing accidental about us bearing young. But if her partner has gotten her to be docile, then it's a simple enough matter from there. Is she docile often?"

Amelia and Mellisa burst into laughter, and our psychologist said, "All Jake has to do to turn her into a rather happy puddle is to walk in the room nowadays. She went from rather aggressive to frighteningly pliable."

"That will be her normal until she has a litter, after which she will be more of a neutral being until she is ready to have another litter, which is when she will become rather aggressive. There's no harm in staying in your current state. I've done it for several decades with no issues." My mother smirked. "If anything, the longer I stay in such a state, the higher the chances

of a good, strong litter. Her father did not claim his reward for some eight months after I was ready for a litter. The number in the litter is dependent on numerous factors, but my average is three to five. Karma's litter had seven, including the unborn child."

Once again, my mother made an odd gesture, which concluded with her palm pressed to her chest.

"You mentioned there were issues with some of the other children?"

"Malnourishment and stress," my mother confessed in an anguished voice. "I feel they knew, so the supplies we were sent could keep us alive, but it was insufficient to care for a growing litter. I do not know why Karma fared better than the rest."

My father went to my mother, sat at her side, and leaned his shoulder against her leg.

Lifting her chin, she added, "Perhaps it is best if I tell this story within, where my child and her mate can ask their questions after they have a better understanding of who and what we are. It is a long tale, as old and tired as we are, but if you wish to understand Yamāntaka, you must also understand everything that came before the god they wish to become."



WE SAT on the floor around a large table. With some help from Aiko, we learned how we were supposed to sit and shown how we might relieve some stress from our legs should we find the pose difficult to hold for long. I gave it twenty minutes at most before my knees filed their pink slips, but I decided I would stay as long as I could before surrendering to the inevitable.

My mother took a position at the head of the table, my father sat at the other end, and Aiko brought her a tray of sand, placing it before her with a low, long bow. Then she retreated, maintaining her bow and leaving my

mother, my father, Jake, and me alone.

We picked a place in the middle on the same side so I could clutch Jake's hand as needed.

"Before humans learned to stand on two feet, there was wildness and no gods," my mother stated, and she held her hand over the tray. The sands shifted and took the form of tall, jagged mountains with streams flowing down the side. A few puffs of sand erupted from the top, and I realized she meant to portray a volcano rather than water. "Mountains were truly dangerous then. The ones that did not speak with lava rose and rocked as the ground shifted and settled."

Grain by grain, the sand settled to form mountain peaks, and after a few moments, I recognized Mount Everest. "Before we had words, we had feelings, and this mountain we named Refuge. It has changed its name many times, becoming what you likely know as Everest. A deadly peak now, but once a place of salvation. Times have changed. She's quite young, although she was fierce from her first breath. I remember when she first peeked out from the land and rose. The ground quaked, stones tore, and she emerged ready to stand sentinel over her forming land."

My eyes widened. If I remembered correctly, if history as we knew it told the truth, and if science had not led us astray, for my mother to have witnessed Everest's birth, she had to have been alive fifty million years ago.

I struggled to compute the number. "You mean it literally. You witnessed the rise of mankind?"

While she smiled, there was something sad about it, and her gaze fell upon Jake. "You are not the first wolf I have seen, but I will be honest, I believed humanity had wiped your kind out. Humans were never wise beings, destroying things solely because they could. Nothing has changed. Your kind predates mankind as well, although not by long—and your kind is why there are domesticated dogs. Your ancestors guided your mundane counterparts into forging alliances with humanity so that they might live long after those

who came before you believed they would die.”

Well, at least I wouldn't be the only one struggling with my mother's claims. Worse, I believed her.

Something about her words rang of the truth, however terrible and difficult that truth was for me to believe.

Jake considered my father before asking, “Did you also witness Everest's birth?”

While my father shook his head, something about the gesture puzzled me. “Oh, no. I was alive then, but I was still a part of the sea clan. We did not inhabit those mountains until after the land settled and became quite a bit less grouchy. Time does not pass for us the same way it does for you. Sometimes, we decide to sleep for a while, and we will wake up after a thousand years in our sanctuary, unaware of how the world passed us by. We would often emerge as foxes and explore, getting a feel for the land and learning the latest flavor of language to be spoken nearby. We would have a litter, set them loose on the world, and watch over them until they breathed their last, returning them to the Earth before sleeping once more. We have stayed awake longer than normal this time.”

I would need to remember my father was a coy being, able to tell many lies with a shake or nod of his head.

Foxes were known for being wily, and I pondered on the possibility my parents were the true cause of their reputation.

“Yamāntaka will not let us rest,” my mother added, and she waved her hand, and the sand fell back into the tray. “Before there were gods, all that mattered to humanity was survival. Then they learned to walk, and their quest for survival became a quest for power. This is when the first god was born. We call him Greed in whatever language we happen to speak at the time. Greed is a deity most worship at least once in their lives, and as such, Greed is a being of true power, holding sway over all.”

Jake stared at the sands, and deep lines creased his brow. “Is this

embodiment, Greed as you call him, what started this whole mess with this group?”

My parents nodded, and my mother said, “From Greed came the other gods in all branches of humanity. The intent of the greed determined if the humans created dark gods or beings of light. It was many years ago. How many do you think?” My mother said something to my father in a fluid, melodic language, and after a moment, he grinned and replied.

Then my father turned his attention to me. “I truly don’t know if you can comprehend how long this group has walked the lands, plaguing us and robbing us of our children and sanctuary, all in their pursuit of Greed. By naming themselves Yamāntaka, they seek to make themselves into gods. This is very in line with Greed’s rise to power and status as eternal. Their efforts will accomplish nothing on that score. Greed will persist long after they are not even a memory to us, washed away in the sands of time.”

I could think of a scale I could compute, as it was readily accepted humanity had not been around during the age of dinosaurs. That my parents had existed so long ago made me question everything I’d known about life and existence.

Could someone like me even remain sane after millions of years?

“Did dinosaurs still roam the Earth?” I asked.

My father reached across the table and patted his hand on the surface. At first, my mother huffed and ignored him, and they played a game where he tapped insistently and she refused his request. After a few minutes, she slid the tray my way, and I passed it to my father.

Water manifested in his hand, and he added it to the sand, recreating Everest but instead of cloaking her in snow, water streamed down her faces, pooling at her base.

I couldn’t tell if my mother contributed her power or if my father could also control the sand.

After a short time, the water began to freeze, beginning with Everest’s

peak and ending at the base, encasing the entire mountain in ice. “No, no. Their time ended before mankind’s began. And while there were asteroids and volcanoes that contributed to their loss, in truth, they died to the Earth doing as she does. She changed, and the climate became unsuitable for their life. The strongest survived. How? That I can’t tell you. We slept then, waking before Everest stirred. Then we watched her and everything around her freeze, and we slept again until the land was ready for us. It was then we were paired—and thus began our end.” My father pressed his finger to Everest’s tip, and the ice began to melt away. “You know those religious texts that discuss a great flood?”

“I do,” I replied, wondering what the story of Noah’s Flood had to do with my parents—and fearing what sort of truth they might fling at me next.

My father waved his hand, and the mountain of sand settled back into the tray, taking the shape of a beach with gentle waves lapping at the shore. “Humanity rose during an ice age, growing in the warmer places along the equator,” my father explained. “When the ice began to recede, flooding happened. This became the foundation for Noah’s Flood. If there was an ark, I never saw any evidence of it, but humanity sheltered in the higher places of the world while everything else melted away. Seas grew, driving humanity away from the oceans. Humanity created its stories to explain what they did not understand. That is part of how they created so many gods, with Greed being the one most common. When the flood waters receded, that is when Yamāntaka began to form, although they did not call themselves that until much, much later. It was thousands of years before humanity refined itself enough to create rituals and establish true religions. But for the sake of our discussion, it was shortly after humanity’s refinement that our troubles began.”

While I questioned his use of refinement, I decided to focus on the more relevant part of the discussion. “What started everything?”

My father’s gaze fell on my mother. His expression was one of ancient

anguish, while hers was one of quiet grief. Finally, she sighed. “Humanity discovered us and believed us to be gods—and no matter how hard we tried, we could not convince them otherwise.”

TEN



Forgiveness only mattered if it helped me heal.

THE TRUTH HURT, and while I would need some quality time with Mellisa to untangle my mess of emotions, I worried for my parents.

The idea of someone living hundreds of years bothered me. Thousands of years horrified me.

But to live millions of years, broken by episodes of sleep, to wake to a life of tragedy and grief? I marveled at their strength and determination to survive. How? Why?

How many children had they buried over their long lives? The shock of knowing I had brothers and sisters I'd never meet battled with my awareness of many lifetimes of grief and suffering.

The sheer amount of strength needed to persist despite all those things astounded me.

How?

How could anyone survive through that?

I doubted I could pick up that many broken pieces with any hope of emerging sane. Yet while they both carried their burdens, they did so with grace.

I'd witnessed insanity more times than I cared about. I'd dipped my toes into those waters, but I'd somehow emerged from the experience changed but able to forge a new future for myself. I'd learned to accept what I couldn't

change, and I'd embraced the value of moving on. I struggled with the forgiveness element of things, but I'd also learned I was under no obligation to forgive anyone for anything.

The only thing I needed to do was accept the damage done and move on. Forgiveness only mattered if it helped me heal.

Jake's mother might never receive my forgiveness for trying to tear Jake and I apart, but I had moved beyond the damage she had wrought. The burdens had become hers and hers alone to bear, and I was not beholden to her.

I did not have to forgive her so she might feel better while facing the consequences of her actions. The only time I would offer such a thing was if it put my soul at peace.

Unfortunately for her, I'd found a different way to claim peace and happiness for myself, although the road would be long to fully surpass the traumas we'd faced as a couple. We'd been broken, but we'd taken all the pieces and glued them together with gold until we became something more than what we'd once been.

I drew in a deep breath and investigated the smells. From Jake, I detected more than a little dismay, so I reached over, took his hand, and squeezed.

From my parents, my nose identified ancient grief, dulled from the passage of time yet still somehow fresh.

A mother who loved their child never walked away from mourning, not completely. The same applied to fathers who struggled to be a rock the rest of their family clung to in the midst of the storm.

With a start, I realized my time in the FBI had prepared me far better than anything else could for this moment, confronting the same sort of trauma I'd worked through day in and day out. In the case of my shattered family, there was no mystery left in the who or the why. The keys to those locked doors resided in the hands of the parents I hadn't known I had.

Neither would replace my pa, but I would cram them into the gaping

holes my ma had left behind.

A slow realization crept in, one that made sense in the turbulence of my life's changed circumstances.

If Yamāntaka had wanted my parents to be gods for them to manipulate and use for their gain, my life had value beyond death as an infant. With time and patience, in the care of someone willing to murder her own son because of his faults, they could have cultivated me to be the figurehead they had needed.

The papers that had come with me to the United States—those I could believe had come from my aunt. But what if my ma had found something in them that had undermined Yamāntaka's efforts?

What if those papers had been why my ma had cultivated me to be a force of good rather than a pawn of evil? What if Yamāntaka had known where I'd gone all along and had changed their course, lured into letting me live in the hopes I could be groomed into a vessel for their use?

Another possibility irritated me. What if the Greenwich group haunting us was the same as Yamāntaka, but a different branch, much like the Chinese Inquisition operated somewhat independently from the United States Inquisition? While the Inquisition within the United States held the most control over the rest of the world, the other branches had a great deal of freedom to operate as it wished.

To Yamāntaka, I would be important.

To those within the Greenwich branch, I would be an obstacle in the way of their goals.

One by one, the puzzle pieces fit together in a way I could understand and work with.

“You've figured something out,” Jake stated, and he squeezed my hand in return, rubbing my skin with his thumb. “Do you need more time to think it through?”

Even after everything that had gone wrong, Jake remembered.

Sometimes, I needed more time than most to process something. With a start, the why of that made sense.

With a lifespan potentially counted in the millions of years, I had the time to puzzle over everything until reaching a conclusion. I could afford to be slow and deliberate.

“I think there are branch groups. This Yamāntaka and the Greenwich group are just two of them, like the Inquisition is mostly operated by those in the United States but have branches all around the world. Greenwich has been plaguing us, but we aren’t important to them—yet we might be important to this Yamāntaka branch. What if Yamāntaka put my adoption into the hands of the Greenwich group to cultivate me?”

The idea of being groomed irritated the hell out of me, but I would bear the burden with grace—and with violence the instant I could get my hands on the bastards behind so much suffering.

“A talented FBI agent in their grasp would be a strong asset. We’ve seen that with our housecleaning efforts,” Jake replied, and he shifted his weight, changed how he sat, and dragged me on to his lap, wrapping his arms around me. “They just didn’t account for your stubbornness and ingrained ethics. You got that from your pa. So, you can think about it this way. Not even these bastards could defeat your pa. He cultivated you far more than any of their attempts through your ma. That doesn’t lessen what happened to him or you.”

Or us, although that would be a discussion for another day.

One day, I hoped thinking about my pa wouldn’t hurt so much.

“We were told about your custodians,” my father said, his tone neutral. “Your pa was mentioned as a kindhearted spirit, one who saw as much grief as we have. That the woman robbed him of a child, and then attempted to rob him of you as well. In the end, she cost him his life. I do not know if what we have heard is the full story, but we were told of trials and trauma.”

That was one way to put it. “I joined the FBI to investigate those who

kidnap children so they can be returned to their family because they had lost a child. It was not until much later I learned she was the one who did it and why—and why my pa suspected but had never acted.”

“Because if he did, he would have risked you and the other children in his care. His is an honorable soul, and may he receive a true reward in his next life or the rest he deserves, whichever his soul wishes for above all else,” my mother stated, and in her tone, I understood she would allow no argument regarding her opinion.

Upon reflection, I agreed with her.

Pa had always wanted to do the right thing, for me, for his lost child, and for his fosters. In the end, he had done his best, and it had cost him his life.

My biological parents could never replace my pa, but I could see them snapping into place where my ma had once been, taking over that part of my life with some work and emotional tape until therapy turned the whole mess into something I could live with.

I settled against Jake, and I shifted my position until I could consider my father. “You needed someone like me when I was a baby.”

“We were told about your work and what you do. You’re not wrong. We needed more than that, I suspect, but had someone with your integrity been watching over you when you had been but an infant, things would be different.”

“I was stolen from my original adoptive parents. We only found that out recently. They were murdered, and the killings were staged by human hands to resemble the work of wolves—but it wasn’t supposed to be wolves, was it? It was supposed to be the work of foxes.”

My father nodded. “We have seen those pictures. They are much like we are when we choose to adopt our third form, one you might one day claim for yourself. Amrita? Do you want to show them the truth?”

I twisted on Jake’s lap in time to witness my mother rise, offer a grim smile, and nod. “I will return soon enough to show you the truth of it. I will

warn our hosts that you two seek comfort with each other, and that it is a thing distressed foxes do. I will offer our apologies for breaching their traditions on that score, and it will be no matter. I will also have some things brought along with tea. I have not shown this Inquisition these things, but I feel the time is right. They brought us hope in their search, and we will work together to secure a future for us all.”

She swept out of the room, and I worried about what other secrets I might uncover before the day was done.

“Don’t look so worried, Karma. The only ones who should worry are those who stand in our way. Now that we are free, we will teach them the meaning of fear, not that they will retain the lesson for long, for we will leave nothing but the memory of their sins in our wake,” my father promised.



AFTER LIVING among Fenerec for so long, I’d erased the idea that man and beast could be blended together to create some strange hybrid. Everything about my mother, with a frosted blue coat of fur, screamed she was a fox, but she stood on two pawed feet armed with long, curved claws.

It took her tapping one such claw to realize she reminded me of a dinosaur in some ways, equipped with weapons meant for one purpose: hunting.

If I were to give a Utah raptor a narrower body, longer arms with more resemblance to hands, a coat of thick, plush fur, and a fox’s head, it would become a being very similar to my mother. Her paws, with claws longer than the whole of my hand, would fill my nightmares for months or years to come.

Jake whistled. “I am getting cuddly horror movie vibes right now, and I’m disturbed over my general reaction to this. And Karma will be able to shift into this shape?”

My mother bobbed her head, and more like a giant bird than a fox, she crossed the distance to us in a single hop, and her furred tail lashed side to side. Her ear position and body language along with scent implied she rejoiced at her form.

As I doubted she would eat me for testing my luck, I hopped off Jake's lap and dared to stroke my hand over her head.

Her fur redefined what it meant to be soft, and the fox in me demanded to snuggle with the predator capable of devouring me in three or four bites.

I did as the fox wanted, discovering a thick plush coat. I breathed in deep, and the scent of fox and something else comforted the animal within me.

With a growing sense of regret, I realized my fox traveled back to our first few hours of life and rejoiced in the scent she knew as our mother. More of the pieces of my life clicked into place, including so many of my behavior problems as a child.

My fox had always been with me, and she had known the bitter truth, of how she had been sent away to a family who'd loved us to witness them be murdered as our littermates had been murdered, turned over to a pa who loved us and a ma who never had, not in truth.

Later, I would weep for it all, but for the moment, I made room for the fox so she could reclaim what had been taken from her.

"This is how I have kept my Amrita for so long, young one. When we are free to assume our truest shape, she will do the same as your Karma does. I do as well. It is comforting. Amrita will not mind you being familiar. Our daughter has chosen you, and you bring her joy, and that is all we care about."

If only all parents could offer such a gift to their children, the world would be a far better place. Jake needed no additional encouragement, and he joined me in admiring my mother's coat, although judging from the sound of his voice, he did not bury his face into the fur as I did. "She's a different color than Karma."

“Yes. Right now, she is in her summer coat, which is darker and better suited to the mountain rocks when there is no snow for us to hide within. Our winter coats are white with a blue-gray sheen, which hides us well and keeps our prey from detecting us. We have seen pictures of our daughter as a fox, and her coloration is as we were when we were young and away from our mountains. In time, she will develop our coloration, although we always have dark hair tipped with white when we are human.”

“And this form?”

“She is old enough now to be taught the trick of it, and it’s a good thing for her to learn, especially if you wish to have a litter. She can nurse the litter when they’re human or kits in this shape without issue, although she will be able to transform as her heart desires. Pregnancy is a rather lengthy affair, but my Amrita bears the burden with much grace and little suffering.”

While I lacked the courage to find out for myself, Jake threw himself in with a disconcerting amount of enthusiasm.

“How long will a pregnancy be?” If Jake had a tail, judging from his tone, he’d be wagging it even more than I tended to do.

“For those who had, before we were locked away in our sanctuary, joined with a human, the pregnancies have been the same as when we breed with each other—three to five years. Their children were not quite so long lived and were not joined with a fox as we are, but they were strong and healthy. I do not know what will happen with your litter, although you will find we are suited for breeding with others who are not just like us. None of our previous children lived long enough to see how they would grow, but Karma seems to have inherited all that our line has to offer her.”

I pulled away from my mother in time to witness Jake nod. “We’d always thought she was an earth witch because she struggles with swimming. But that’s not the case really, is it?”

“We were told of what your Inquisition feels witchcraft is, and our art is not the same, although there are similarities. Her issues are simple enough.

She is as much my child as she is her mother's child. Should she try to drown, once she breathes in some water, she will adapt to the environment and find it quite comfortable. That's from me. The water loves us, so it welcomes us into its embrace. The Earth likewise loves her and will share its favor with her, I am sure. But once she actually is put in a situation where she cannot breathe air, she will learn how to breathe water, much as I do. It will be quite natural for her."

"I no longer have to worry if she trips and falls into a puddle?"

I laughed, and knowing it would drive him insane, I said, "You might have to worry for other reasons now, Jake. You might not get me out of the puddle. I might just stay in the puddle forever."

Through mouthing words, my mate informed me I would pay for my commentary later. Knowing him, I would enjoy every minute of it. Satisfied I'd won the round, I examined my mother nose to tail. Unlike most dinosaurs, she stood upright like a human although her body shape allowed her to adopt a streamlined running stride. Having witnessed her jump, I bore a healthy respect for her muscular legs, which were longer than a human's and better designed for long leaps and ground-eating gaits. "If you were to race a cheetah, who would win?"

"The cheetah initially," my father admitted. "But we have the endurance they do not, and we are not much slower when chasing. We can run on all fours in this shape, which is a little faster than when on two legs, but our agility is reduced. Cheetahs make excellent companions for us, and we spent many a year hunting with them when we roamed the world. It saddened us when catastrophe befell them, although I find comfort they managed to endure through the years, although so few remained then."

Unlike a dinosaur, which had a powerful, thick tail much like a lizard's, I determined my mother's tail, thicker and more plush than any animal's tail I'd seen, matched mine, although it was much larger and softer. "Will my coat soften like this, too?"

“Yes. The younglings have a coarser coat texture until they reach at least fifty.”

I nodded. “Can she speak in this form?”

“Yes and no. That is a magic you’ll have to learn for yourself. We’ve been having a conversation the entire time. She finds your curiosity pleasing, and she does not mind touch. Amrita? Did you warn our hosts of the sounds you can make?”

My mother nodded.

“I recommend you step back. She’ll demonstrate some of our offensive and defensive abilities. Be as soft as you can about it,” my father requested, and he covered his ears.

With a little more warning, I would have done the same, but my mother inhaled and issued forth a sharp bark, and the sound pierced through the air, stabbed at my eardrums, and burned within my very bones. I yelped, as did Jake. Without hesitation, she added to the barrage with a series of deep hoots, which resonated in my chest. I discovered she could, at her whim, dictate my heartbeat through the sound.

She took care with falling quiet, and she cooed at us, adding in a trill and a soft, rumbling purr.

My father chuckled and lowered his hands from his ears. “We have many more sounds in that shape, and you’ll find many of them are potent. We are also able to call mundane foxes to us.”

“Is it normal for the foxes to listen when we’re in fox form as well?”

My parents nodded, and my father came over, giving my shoulder a pat. “Just as it’s normal for a little one like yourself to find comfort in a vixen’s den when not around others of our kind. We heard that tale, and many others, of your time when little. That is not how we would have raised you, although we would have been harsh regarding some aspects of your care due to necessity.”

“Not biting people is important to learn,” I agreed.

“And when raised among us, your teeth would have been rather sharp and dangerous.” My father opened his mouth and showed me his teeth, gesturing to several of his, which were more pointed and with a jagged edge compared to a human’s. “When our nature is restrained, we can make our teeth appear to be more human. You were likely required to act like a human, and...”

“My adoptive parents,” I prompted. “What Ma did didn’t change the fact she was my ma for most of my life, even when the circumstances could be better. While I cannot erase her from the past, I am choosing to erase her from the future. She was not ideal, and I logically know that now. I did not understand that then, nor was I in a position to accept such a betrayal.”

Jake snagged me by the waist, pulled me to him, and dropped a kiss on the top of my head. “We’ve been worried because she seemed to have hormonal issues and odd growth spurts.”

“May my Amrita spare me from her wrath for this, but you have nothing to be concerned with. Our children are ready to have litters by the time they are seventeen, although most wait for a while and do not engage with a male for some years after. None of our children have had children; very few survived beyond the age of twenty-two or so. The world is a harsh place, and while they carried the gift of our longevity within them, we can be killed. It becomes harder to kill us as the years go by. By thirty, we are far more durable than the average human, but our children simply never have lived that long.”

Until now. “I’m the oldest child you’ve ever had?”

While both of my parents hesitated, they nodded.

“We allowed our children to run wild and free when the winds sang to them and they wished to go. We guarded them the best we could from a distance, but the world was not kind. It never has been. But then Yamāntaka came, and we counted the length of their lives in hours and days. Our grief has survived far longer than they. Yet that is the one thing we have not had, the chance to witness our progeny survive and thrive in this world. Our

children are not a legacy or a prize for us to hold. Life is a gift, however long or short that life may be. Your wolf may live long and prosperous, much like we have lived long, although we have not prospered as we would like.”

How could they, with a group of child-killing bastards haunting their steps and holding them captive in what should have been their sanctuary?
“Hey, Jake?”

“What is it?”

“Think the Inquisition will let us murder them all?”

“Considering they gave you your favorite gun, I suspect they’ll provide ammunition for it and look the other way while you artistically paint the landscape with their blood.”

“Maybe we should go to the shooting range for some practice. I don’t want to waste the extra rounds. I would prefer a one and done affair.”

“Do you really think you could hit them with just one round when using that gun?”

“That’s a good point. I better get a second gun, one with a sensible firing rate. How about a machine gun? I could go for a rocket launcher, too.”

Jake snorted and tightened his hold on me. “A machine gun has a higher rate of fire because you can use a proper clip with it. A rocker launcher is just ridiculous. Why would you want a rocket launcher?”

“They’re fun, and I would only need one round if they’re stupid enough to stand together, Jake.”

“You’re just mad you weren’t allowed to defect in London.”

I turned my saddest eyes on Jake. “But they let me fire the rocket launcher.”

“I’m sorry, Karma. And if the Inquisition does let you use one, you’re going to have to learn how to aim them. You better just stick to your strengths and either use your claws and teeth or the machine gun.”

I shrugged. “I’ll make do, but I think that I’m going to need a rocket launcher, Jake.”

“I’ll see what I can do, but no promises.”

ELEVEN



“You could have stopped me at any time.”

OUR HOSTS GAVE US wrapped presents we were to open later, plied us with tea and dinner, and provided us with a history of the group’s operations in Japan. None of us knew, for certain, what to call them. What Jake and I knew as the Greenwich group operated on a different scale than Yamāntaka. In Japan, they shared more tendencies with the group plaguing my parents, but their goals fell more in line with what we expected from the Greenwich group.

Tiring of listening to the debate, the confusion multiple names created, and wanting to settle down to the important business of murdering child-killing bastards, I said, “We should just lump them all together under Greenwich. First, if this Yamāntaka group wishes to become gods, we strip them of their desire by refusing to acknowledge their goals. While Mr. Greenwich likely dislikes that his family has become the foundational naming for this organization, his case is where the truth began to surface. Second...”

Scowling, I realized I hadn’t thought of a second reason for my proposal. No matter what we did, the group’s actions would leave scars on our souls. We worked to prevent any more harm, something I had learned early on in the FBI.

No matter what we did, investigations rarely took us to the places we wished to go, delving into the darkest waters of society. The scars sometimes

faded.

Sometimes, they did not.

My parents endured many scars, and one of them was in the shape of my entire life. That one might heal, depending on the choices we made in the upcoming days. The rest of their scars, each one in the shape of a child they had desperately wished to love and see thrive in the world, would remain.

Not even millions of years could defeat my mother's love.

If only humanity could say the same.

Everyone stared at me, and I shrugged. "When I'm honest with myself, I don't need a second reason. These bastards wish to become gods, so let us strip them of everything they have worked for. We should begin with their name. Greenwich is as good a name as any, and it represents a failure for them—and a success for us. Annabelle Greenwich survived, and the group lost their ability to access a sensitive weapon system. But we should look at that as part of the differences between the branches of this group. If we think of them like the FBI or the Inquisition, it's not hard to wrap our heads around. One facet of the group wants divinity. Others want power of a different nature, in the form of weapons. Weapons are a tool on the global stage, one meant to intimidate, to control, and to begin or end wars. They could be terrorists—or they could be trying to work the global domination angle. If they are only partially aware that witches, Fenerec, and immortal foxes exist, then having a pair of immortal foxes would be a huge power play for them. I'm still learning about the Inquisition, but I worked with Jake for years without having any idea he was more than a highly irritating man."

My mate and husband snorted, and if we had been in America, he would have dragged me on to his lap in one of his possessive demonstrations. Rather than fall prey to his usual urges, he huffed at me. "And when I wasn't highly irritating you, you wanted me. Admit it, Karma."

"No."

He pouted, and I smiled at his reaction.

“She makes a good point.” My father fiddled with the tray of sand and water, and he created a mountain slope with a carved stone entry flanked with a pair of pillars wrapped in fox tails. “When I think about it through her eyes, that could be precisely it. Once old enough, we essentially do become immortal. We are difficult to kill, and we can slumber for thousands of years. This age has been interesting, so we have only slept for short periods.”

“Six to eight hours most nights, to be specific,” my mother stated, and she smirked at my father. “When things become interesting, we don’t sleep at all. It’s been a few weeks since we have opted for sleep. Our bodies no longer need it, not like we once did. We can sleep when we want to, but it’s not necessary. But if they wish to cow humanity with our visage and the idea that we are immortal, that could work. Humanity is a herd species, prey—easily funneled where we might wish for them to go on a hunt. Early on, they entertained us. We did not kill them during our hunts, but we entertained ourselves frightening them into good behavior. We had a forest then, not far from these parts.”

I realized my parents likely had been the origin of fox myths, and I leveled a glare at them. “You tricked them into thinking you were demons!”

My mother grinned and my father shrugged.

“Having seen what you can do to a couch in five minutes, I feel that they did not have to do much to trick them beyond being present,” Jake teased.

I turned my head and issued a warning chitter. “You could have stopped me at any time.”

“And deprive you of a chance to indulge in some furry destruction? We needed a new couch anyway. But, if Greenwich doesn’t know about Fenerec or witches, and they believe that foxes are the only supernatural forces on the planet, why do they want to control you for their plans? That’s what I don’t understand.” Jake leaned over, snagged me by the waist, and pulled me close to him. He didn’t haul me on to his lap, but he tucked me close to his side.

I recognized his wolf driving the behavior and relaxed against him to dull

the edge of his protective instincts. “They have demonstrable power, Jake. You’re just handsome and annoying unless you turn into a wolf, and then your breath stinks, you’re handsome, and you’re annoying.”

He chuckled. “And neither of those things look all that impressive.”

“She can make people explode with spikes of rock. You’re just handsome, really. And while I appreciate the benefits of that, you have no real value to this group.”

“Which is why they shot me and discovered I’m much harder to kill than I look. And well, they discovered the same about you, but they didn’t live to tell the tale.”

It had taken time, but I had accepted I’d become a bloodthirsty monster hellbent on revenge while convinced Jake had been killed. “If they hadn’t tried to kill you, I wouldn’t have killed them.”

“So, are you convinced we’re not dead yet?”

Rather than tackle my spouse and engage in a wrestling match I would lose, I chattered my frustration at him, snapped my teeth, and swore revenge as soon as we were somewhere private. “You’re never going to let me live that down, are you?”

“Never. It’s a joy in my life. Once I realized what was going on, you were a mix of sweet, absurd, and entertaining. No, not just entertaining, highly entertaining. But, it does make me question some things about your tendencies. Your mother does not seem nearly as emotionally invested as your father.”

“Oh, she is,” my father stated in an amused tone. “She just has more pride than she knows what to do with and refuses to admit it. We have been together for so long we no longer understand how to be apart. This does not bother me. She is a wilder spirit than I, so she sometimes wonders what would change if we were apart. But she is as bound to me as I am to her. It amuses us to play games with each other. It keeps things from becoming stale and boring. She is far more willing to test you than I. But, neither of us

knows how to handle this situation. We've seen many children grow to become old, but never ours. You're the first to reach the age you have."

I couldn't help but wonder how many graves existed, dedicated to my brothers and sisters. That none had lived as long as I deepened my turmoil—and further firmed my resolve.

Greenwich would die, and I would live. Before, I had survived to spite my ma, but I would change that to something better.

I would live to give my parents a chance at peace. If I were the only one of their children to thrive, I would do so for as long as I had any say in it. My worries for what would come—and my awareness Fenerec were not eternal—would be a secret burden. Perhaps one day I would discuss it with Jake.

Fenerec could die.

Fenerec often went mad with age. I'd been warned about that enough times to believe it.

What I could change, I would.

What I couldn't change, I would fight against until hope no longer remained.

"Am I old enough to have a better chance of survival now?"

"I believe so," my mother replied, although her expression promised something troubled her. "What I have been told about the shooting in London indicates you already benefit from our resilience. That would have killed a human, without a doubt. At first, we take a long time to heal, but we can heal from damage that would kill most. If the damage is severe, we will shift to a different form until we can endure as a human again. You may have done that in the aftermath, though you may have listened to your fox and allowed her to take control. That is fine. She is you as much as you are her. As you age, you'll understand she is just a part of you, and that it's a matter of controlling yourself rather than a separate entity." My mother's gaze fell upon Jake. "Whereas you seem to be a body sharing two souls, and the wolf you live with is there solely because he wishes to be. You have a relationship. She

will not and does not, not in the same sense.”

“She can’t run wild like Fenerec can,” my husband murmured.

“I do not understand what you speak of,” she admitted.

As I’d gotten the lecture more times than I cared to think about, I took a moment to explain how Fenerec sometimes went mad and became rather murderous beasts, usually starting their rampage with their loved ones. “It’s a real issue, and the Inquisition exists in part to make certain these wild wolves hurt as few as possible. It’s generally assumed the mate of the wolf isn’t going to survive.”

“You will be able to control that with time, I’m sure.” My mother got up, came over, and leaned down to regard my mate through narrowed eyes. Reaching out, she touched a finger to Jake’s brow. “Ah, yes. I see what you mean now. Should you lose the balanced state of your souls, the wild animal emerges. Maddened from the loss of the human side? We might be able to work with this. Rabten?”

My father rose and joined my mother in scrutinizing Jake. “I think I can teach her how to tame the wildness, although I will need to observe him for a while. This is not a problem we or our kin have.”

Well, that was good news for both of us—and our children, especially if they inherited his tendencies more than mine. “Is there anything that can be done to help them with it?”

“As a long-term solution?” my father tilted his head to the side, and his brows furrowed. “I will think on it. If nature did not intend for his kind to exist, they would not. But without knowing what sort of magic birthed his kind, it is difficult to say if we can change their imbalance. But there is an imbalance there. Perhaps an accidental creation of humanity meddling where humanity should not meddle?”

That I could believe. I’d learned early in my career in the FBI that humans did many things solely because they could. It took very little for someone to abandon their morality in favor of immediate gratification. “I can

always leash him and just make him stay nearby should he step out of line, assuming you can teach me how to contain him when he's being more beastly than he should be."

My mother snorted and my father laughed. He then said, "You'd just end up arguing over which one of you controls the leash and wears the collar. You'll have a harder time keeping him away. We men are rather like pests in that regard."

No kidding. I stared at Jake and waited for him to accept responsibility for being a pest.

"I've learned that look. That is the look of expectation, and if I agree with her, I might get out of this alive and unscathed. If I don't agree with her, I might get bitten. The problem with this is she is yet to comprehend I enjoy when she gets snappy and decides to start talking with her teeth. She has not talked with her teeth ever since she entered her fertility cycle."

Jake played up his pout and sad eyes because he understood I tended to crack and laugh at him. Sure enough, a snorted giggle escaped before I could stop it. As I couldn't laugh and leer at the same time, I caved to the inevitable and chortled at his expression.

"That is a problem you can resolve easily enough when the time is right," my mother promised. "Just be difficult. If you are difficult for long enough, she will become impatient, and that is when the biting happens."

My father snickered, and he showed me his arm, which bore a collection of scars. "And he will learn to get his arm in the way should he wish to preserve his throat. She never bites to harm, but once she gets latched on to the throat, she will not stop until she gets what she wants."

"It's an instinct for us," my mother added. "We women tend to be difficult when being convinced it is time to have a litter, but once we are convinced, we are even more difficult to restrain. Or, once in the later stages of fertility, exceptionally docile with our chosen male. I will warn you now. Any interloping male will be lucky to survive her wrath in her current state."

We are extreme beings, and our docility is matched—and sometimes surpassed—by our ferocity should someone come between us and our mating partner. And we do not warn before we strike in those circumstances. I would warn your kind so that there are not any mistakes—or be prepared to restrain her should you happen to like the male who stirred her ire.”

Well, that would add the wrong kind of spice to our lives. “Does that apply to interloping females?”

“Doubly so. A wise vixen steers clear of a mating vixen’s male.”

“And if the female happens to be a friend?”

“Bouts of crippling self-esteem and despondence,” my father stated, and he raised a brow at my mother. “Even after our long years together, she will lose that war and mope mightily should she think a mutual female friend has designs on me.”

Well, that explained a lot about how I reacted to Mellisa sometimes. “Jake, it seems my issues are, indeed, genetic.”

“Well, now that we know about them, we can work around them. I’m going to need some time to get used to the idea of several years of pregnancy hormones before we have an entire litter. And considering the situation, we’re going to need a strong pack willing to stay on guard for a long time, because our children will likely take after you in terms of aging.”

“Yes, it is quite the responsibility.” My mother sighed. “You’ll adapt to being older than you believed, but I know the true date of your birth, and I can work with this Inquisition so you have those documents mortals do enjoy. They’ve also promised your children will be protected as much as they can. You will not share our fate. And perhaps, one day, there will be many foxes living within the forests and on the mountains of the world, watching over humanity and witnessing the Earth’s growth.”

I understood what she did not say.

She would not stop until Greenwich fell, but she would not fight that battle alone. Revenge would be hers, justice would be mine, and we would

free the future of the group's corruption and influence. For the moment, the how of it was yet another secret piled upon many. While I hadn't understood then how right I had been, we would find answers in China—and once we dealt with the situation in China, onward to Tibet.

Then, there would be one final location we would need to go to receive true closure: home.

There was no time better than the present. I turned my attention to Aiko, who did an admirable job of pretending to be a statue. "Aiko-san, would China be willing to host the Japanese for this fight?"

While she hesitated, she offered a bow. "We don't have many fighters, Karma-sama. I am not certain how much help we will be."

It pained me that I'd become better at reading between the lines, not needing long to comprehend what she tried to tell me. I allowed myself to smile. "If I were in need of swords or guns, that might be an issue, but I think we need ideas from those who have been burned by Greenwich. Not all plans need fighters, but if they are willing to fight if needed, that would be ideal. I can't promise safety, but if we can catch their trail, I can promise a chance for vengeance and justice."

"I will see what I can do, but China is our ally in this, and I do not see any reason for them to refuse this request. How many would you like to accompany you?"

"As many as are willing to come." I rose to my feet, clasped my hands together, and bowed as she had. "You give my family a gift that can never be repaid."

"It is our honor, Karma-sama."

TWELVE



I enjoyed bashing heads together as needed.

IN THE WEE hours of the morning, Jake and I returned to our hotel room. Grateful to be too tired to think, I went to bed. I resisted the idea of getting up using my teeth, resulting in my mate being bitten more than a few times. Had I been sufficiently coherent, I would have remembered Jake liked when I got rough with him.

As he enjoyed showing off his strength, he captured my wrists in one of his hands, laughed at my attempts to escape him, and waited until I wore myself out to begin his campaign to indulge before returning to work. Our hosts, as promised, left us to our own devices until we came out of our room of our own volition.

If anyone wondered why my hair had seen better days and Jake had a few new bite marks on his arm, nobody questioned us about it. After a robust lunch, as we'd missed breakfast altogether, we met with Aiko in the lobby, and she escorted us to a limousine waiting outside at the valet.

She joined us in the back, and she picked a briefcase up off the seat, set it on her lap, and opened it. "Tonight, you will be staying at one of Tokyo's finest hotels for an evening of indulgence, as our primary concerns in the area have been eliminated. Our agents have not found any evidence of activity from other suspected members of Greenwich. The day after tomorrow, you will fly to China, where the Chinese Inquisition will assist you in going to the

sanctuary in Tibet.”

I wondered why Aiko called the place a sanctuary.

Everything I’d learned indicated it was a prison and a graveyard, one filled with nothing but bad memories. I understood wanting to return to even a bad situation, as hope had a way of digging in deep tendrils and refusing to let go.

For me and Jake, we’d turned that dim hope into something, although it had taken a great deal of help to accomplish.

Not everyone got as lucky. Not everyone even emerged from their situations alive. I understood that from my work within the FBI. I supposed my reluctance to quit had stemmed from my understanding that while Jake was many things, and not all of them good, he would always do his best to undo the damage and right the wrongs.

He’d been far more of a prisoner than I.

He still remained, in many ways, a prisoner, where I’d learned to run free and leave the chains that had bound me behind, picking and choosing which ones I kept and clung to. Shaking my head to clear my thoughts, I focused on the important matter of bringing an end to Greenwich. “Have the Chinese learned anything?”

“After receiving the trail of when you originally went to the United States, yes. Your case has done a lot of good. They’ve uncovered an illegal trafficking ring targeting unwanted children in China. While you were not sold to this organization, the organization ultimately assisted in your journey to the United States. They’re the one who falsified your birth certificate at your aunt’s request. It seems one of them owed her a debt, and they paid that debt off through making certain you were placed in the United States.” Aiko’s expression soured. “Unfortunately, the individuals in question are not Normals, and this has created a problem. The Inquisition, being grateful for their assistance in this matter, is opting for a more merciful route, assuming the agents are willing to tell us what they know about Greenwich, their

operations, and any children they bought. They have one strike left, and if they return to their old ways, they will be executed. They may receive full pardons if they work at preventing such abuses again in the future.”

No matter how hard the FBI worked, trafficking rings flourished, stealing babies, children, and adults alike, and subjecting them to the sort of terror I struggled to imagine. While I wouldn't mind shoving Jake's mother into a mud puddle and messing up her hair, my desire for payback ended there.

We had all made mistakes, and while I doubted my fox would ever accept the woman, I could, with some time and thought, understand her position.

However, the bitch would learn I would become an unclimbable mountain for Jake's sake. It had taken some time and conversing with Mellisa to understand I'd gotten the milder dose of abuse, neglect, and mistreatment.

Jake had been pushed, bullied, and roped into being someone he could never realistically be.

He preferred to follow. I preferred to take life by the reins and forge paths. He preferred to support.

I enjoyed bashing heads together as needed.

When put together in the right circumstances, we became something more than our original pieces, although we still had a long way to go.

We would always have a long way to go, but I'd learned a hell of a lot about the nature of abuse, the long journey towards recovery, and the lasting damage family could cause.

And so I healed.

I considered Jake, who eyed Aiko's briefcase with interest.

I smiled at the telltale signs he wanted to work. “If you have rap sheets and similar, you'll make Jake's day if you let him read and sink his teeth into some work. It seems he wishes to hunt.”

Aiko laughed and handed over a thick stack of papers, and Jake lit up as he always did when given an important job to do.

When I thought about it, Mellisa's analogy of us being work dogs made a

great deal of sense. If left alone with nothing to do, we tended to destroy things, too, including our furniture.

“What type of trafficking?”

“Fortunately, non-sexual,” Aiko replied, and while her expression remained unhappy, she relaxed in her seat. “They have modeled some of their behavior after familial mafia rings, bringing in victims at an early age and cultivating them to be part of this...” The woman frowned.

“Cult?” I suggested.

“Cult is as good a word as any. It seems at least some branches of Greenwich worship these foxes—and another branch of it wishes to control or destroy them and take their place. China has isolated four different branches of the group so far, with two worshipping this fox species, one seeking to eliminate it, and another pursuing other goals, mostly on the global domination front.” Aiko sorted through some of her remaining papers before handing me several sheets. “The London attack was the work of the domination group, and from what we’ve figured out, they were hoping to get information out of you regarding the kidnapping of Annabelle Greenwich. They were unaware of your identity, as this branch doesn’t follow the worshippers or their enemy branch. As such, they didn’t recognize you based on your more distinctive traits.”

“My pale skin and hair?”

“The white tips in particular,” she confirmed.

“I usually dyed or trimmed them away, but not always.” I considered my mate, who shuffled through the papers while narrowing his eyes. “Hey, Jake?”

“Hmm?”

“I’m an endangered species.”

He snorted, shook his head, and plucked out a page before handing it over to me. “Does this fellow look familiar to you?”

I eyed the rap sheet, and my eyes widened.

In the photograph, the London shooter seemed like the sort of man you'd want living next door, clean cut in a suit and as unoffensive as possible. "That's the bastard who made me think you were dead." My memories remained hazy, but when I thought about it, he hadn't been among those I'd slaughtered for taking Jake away from me. "Good eye, Jake."

After taking a moment to read over the sheet, which informed me that Mr. Maven couldn't have been more white bread American if he tried, had remained in the United States for most of his life before smuggling firearms overseas in a personal yacht, docking at a private property before heading to London to participate in the shooting. I handed the sheet back to Aiko. "I want him, and when I'm done with him, you'll be using a shovel to pick up his remains."

The woman smiled, accepted the page, and reviewed it before pulling out her phone, taking a photo, and sending a text. "Excellent. We were hoping for a confirmation. The Inquisition managed to get video surveillance from contacts in London, and they located where the group had gathered before making the hit, allowing us to identify the members. I suspect you'll have to identify most of these, Karma-sama, as you did not leave sufficient intact to identify by visual appearance. Some we had DNA for, but not as many as we would like."

I wagged my fingers at my mate until he gave me the pile. With a little help from my fox, I identified the bastards who had been involved. "I guess I did do a lot of damage to their faces." Once certain I had the whole lot of them, I gave Aiko the sheets. "That should be all of them."

Aiko counted the pages, and she nodded. "Excellent memory, Karma-sama. This matches the skull count we got from the site."

When in doubt, counting skulls was a good way to identify the number of corpses present, and in retrospect, I realized I'd been rather thorough in dispatching my prey. "Jake, I think I need to have more therapy about the London shooting."

“This is nothing new,” he replied, although he dug out his phone to send off a text. “Mincing people tends to count as psychologically damaging, and while you’ve done well in therapy, you tend to shut down about the London shooting. I, on the other hand, have very little psychological damage about the shooting, as by the time I became coherent, they’d gotten a lead on you, and I was able to go along for the ride. You were alive and well, although a fox, so I wasn’t damaged. Well, by anything other than that Demerol episode.”

As my mouth became a lethal weapon when on the drug, and I’d tried to murder everyone within range, I couldn’t begrudge anyone for having their feelings hurt. “Which part hurt you?”

“The part about swearing you’d never make use of your walking, talking sex toy again if I didn’t stop siding with the enemy.”

As I could see myself saying just that, especially under the influence of Demerol, I shrugged. “I say really stupid shit when drugged. Have your feelings recovered from that incident?”

“For the most part. I’m still holding a grudge nobody believed me when I said to avoid Demerol.”

I grinned, as Jake had done his best to convince the medical staff to keep me off Demerol. “You may as well tell Mellisa you need more therapy about the Demerol episodes. She might even let us in the same session together to talk about that one.”

As a general rule, we did our therapy separately, although we had joint sessions to discuss the reasons our marriage had fallen apart, the toxicity of the situation, and the steps we needed to take to prevent similar happening again in the future. Mellisa had worked wonders on us, as we’d both been mentally unstable for a variety of reasons, resulting in a situation dangerous for us.

Human couples would have separated and divorced, but Jake ran a high risk of running wild without me.

Our time apart had broken us even more than what had divided us in the first place.

Rather than allow myself to spiral back into self-loathing over the past, I lifted my chin and said, “You should tell Mellisa that your parents need to undergo sessions with her to prepare them for the reality of meeting my parents. Because after seeing what my mother can do, I do not want to see what my father can do—and depending on what they were told, your parents might tempt them into giving us a demonstration.”

Jake winced, but he sent another message. “You make a good point. I’m also concerned about how my mother is going to react when she learns your family history.”

I considered Pauline Thomas and everything I knew about her. “Maybe we should bring her to China and set her loose. All we’d have to do is tell her this group has consistently murdered my siblings over thousands of years. The group will cease being a problem. She’s a lot of things, but that gross injustice would trip her trigger. And while my fox excels at holding a grudge, I can be sensible when it suits me.”

“Could it suit you a little more often?” Jake muttered.

As I knew it would drive him insane, I replied, “No.”

“You’re wicked.”

I could be. “What do you think we’re going to find in China, Jake?”

“Answers, but we’re going to have quite the fight to get them—and we might have to interrogate the corpses. Where do we begin, Aiko?”

“Our first stop will be at a port city, where your aunt sacrificed her life to make certain you made it overseas. According to the information I have, the Chinese were successful in finding those who aided her, although they were forced to pick between you and your aunt. With luck, we will get the first of the answers we need without a fight. The Chinese Inquisition will be providing several translators, and among them will be a witch and a Fenerec, both of whom are skilled at detecting falsehoods. If they’re hiding something,

they'll tell us."

"The contact doesn't speak English?" I guessed.

Aiko shrugged. "Thus far, no. We'll find out more when we arrive. I believe the American Inquisition has some news for you regarding your adoption as well."

We'd gone from a slow crawl to a rapid acceleration, and I ran a high risk of whiplash. No matter what came, I would be ready for it. "Good. I'd rather get to the bottom of this sooner than later."

I had the rest of my life to enjoy, and I meant to do it without the worry of Greenwich looming over my head.



ONE DAY, I would learn. Aiko had indicated we'd be going to a hotel, but she took us to another sprawling manor, one with immaculate gardens, groves of trees within its walls, a shrine, and a stable. Curious horses watched us as we strolled along the fence of their pasture, their ears pricked forward in interest, their eyes bright and their coats gleaming. I had no idea what breed they were, I suspected it was something rare to match the rest of the place.

Aiko tilted her head in the direction of the main building of the manor, which had come from some distant past. "This home has been in the Inquisition since before there was an Inquisition," she informed us, and she turned her attention to the shrine behind us. "That shrine was dedicated to witches and wolves before the original builders were aware of what lurked in the forests surrounding their home. With time, some became wolves and the age of their line led to witchcraft in others. And so, the nature of the shrine changed, although to prying eyes, it remained as expected."

I understood. Rather than a hotel, where someone might attempt to listen in, going to a manor owned and operated by the Inquisition might keep our

efforts secret.

While I still feared more betrayal, I recognized Aiko did her best to protect us all, my parents and newly discovered family included.

Jake eyed the shrine with interest. “Please do not be offended by my ignorance, but how has the Inquisition managed to stay secret in Japan? I have seen shrines all throughout Tokyo dedicated to warding off forces of evil.”

Aiko smiled. “I am not offended, Jake-sama. We hide in plain sight. Why would anyone believe there is anything more to the Fenerec and witches when we believe in many different spirits? Fenerec are just one of many, as are witches. Take the oni. We have shrines dedicated to warding them away and protecting our souls and families from their influences. Why would anyone think a witch is anything other than another being of our mythology? Something to be respected and possibly feared, yes, but it is just a matter of establishing a shrine to protect ourselves from these things and allowing human nature to handle the rest. Many hold faith that the shrines do protect us from these influences, which ultimately protects us from the prying eyes of humanity.”

When I took the time to think about it, I realized she made a good point. “It doesn’t matter if Fenerec, witches, or even foxes like me are real here, does it? Even if someone from here told others, it would be assumed it was due to cultural belief rather than a part of reality.”

With a nod of her head, Aiko turned to a nearby grove of cherry trees. “That is, in part, why we will not be the weak link that breaks the chain of secrecy. Our culture allows us to maintain the ruse.”

I read between the lines: she felt the United States would be the likeliest candidate for failure. Unfortunately for my national pride, I agreed with her.

Before I could say anything, Jake sighed. “We do what we can, but Americans are stubborn and curious. We’ll one day be found out. But will much change? That’s the question.”

“I have my doubts,” Aiko admitted. “But it is something we need to consider as we head to China. China is another weak link for many reasons. While they have many cultural beliefs, those abroad are far less likely to buy into the idea that it is their cultural beliefs manifesting as overactive imaginations compared to us.”

My eyes widened at the implication we might ultimately reveal the existence of the supernatural to the world. “You don’t think that might happen, do you?”

“That we might witness the unveiling of all we are to a population ill-prepared for our kind?” Aiko shrugged. “It is entirely possible. We battle an opponent who understands the value of foxes and knows, at least some, of their power. They have numbers. They have influence. It is a possibility we cannot afford to ignore. And that leads us to this talk. Should we be revealed to the public, what will you do?”

I had no idea, and I stared at Jake, hoping he might be able to offer some insight. Something about my expression amused him, as he chuckled, reached out, and flicked my nose with his finger. “Don’t look so stricken, Karma. It’s something the Inquisition has worried about for a long time. If we are uncovered, we will continue to do as always. We hide, and should someone be caught in the act, we will hope they are a good spokesperson for the rest of us so that we can continue to hide. Staying in the shadows protects those who cannot defend themselves from our strength or power. The Inquisition is not just about maintaining our secrecy, but it’s about protecting those who can’t protect themselves. That should not change. The job will be just a little harder moving forward.”

“That’s quite the understatement,” I muttered.

“The only real difficulty will be hiding when one of us has harmed a Normal.” Jake grinned, leaned over, and kissed the top of my head. “If anything, now that you’re fully disclosed on the Inquisition, once we’re back in the United States, you can take on the harder cases. We’ll both be

challenged, as hunting rogues is tougher than Normals.”

I could use a solid challenge. Once again, Mellisa’s work dog analogy came back to haunt me. “I’m a work dog who hasn’t been working enough,” I informed my husband.

“You’ll be up to your neck in work in no time. Judging from what Aiko is trying to say through not saying it, we’re going to have our hands full the instant we get to China.”

The woman smiled. “I thought you would see things clearly, Jake-sama. China does want this resolved—and quickly. But they have different motivations from us for resolving this, and as always, it deals with power.”

Jake grabbed me by the waist and hauled me up. As always, I latched on to him so he wouldn’t drop me. “If they want to try to gain some power by allying themselves with Karma’s parents, I am fine with this. China is a lot of things, but the United States has claims to Karma, second to me.”

Ah. I understood. To soothe Jake’s jealous wolf, I tightened my hold on him with my legs and made use of his shoulder as a pillow. “You can’t cause an international incident with China, Jake.”

“If they hurt you, I’m causing an incident.”

“You would have to beat her parents to the chase,” Aiko reminded my mate. “And they hit harder than any of us do. What I truly worry about is what they will do now that they have been set free and they know their sole living child is safe.”

“Burn the world down does come to mind,” Jake admitted.

“We will work hard to make certain that does not happen,” Aiko assured us. “And now that we have concluded that unpleasant business, let us meet with the others so we might discuss everything we have learned—excepting that, of course.”

Of course. I filed that away as something to think about later, once I could steal some time alone with Jake. “One last question, if you don’t mind.”

“What is it, Karma-sama?”

“Should we be careful about what we say and do in China?”

“There are eyes everywhere in China. I would walk in silence and act only when you are confident of what you must do. For now, China needs you. But that may change. You will be safe enough as long as you play the game. And like Greenwich, China desires power. You would be wise to remember that.”

THIRTEEN



Moving forward, things would be better.

I APPRECIATED the conference room with its regular chairs and solid wood desk, although the crowd of thirty people crammed into the space less than thrilled me. Jake sat beside me, and he defeated my father for the spot using a low growl promising violence.

Jake's display pleased my parents, although my mother's raised brow won her the other chair beside me, forcing my father to sit across from me to be somewhat close. The drama amused me, and I kept a firm hold on Jake's hand so nobody would unseat him as the victor.

Mellisa claimed one of the seats next to my father, and she spoke to him in a soft, soothing tone. Of all the people in the world, I suspected my parents needed therapy more than anyone else.

So many years, the loss of all children but one, and their trials would have broken anyone else. In a way, I'd inherited their resilience—and I held a better understanding of how so much had gone wrong in my life.

Moving forward, things would be better.

If we played every card right, there would be a future with all of us in it. My life could never make up for the loss of their other children, but I represented more than mere hope to them.

I refused to disappoint them.

As time favored none of us, I turned my attention to the two Chinese

delegation members seated at the far end of the table. They spoke with Aiko, as they had from the moment of their arrival.

Jake squeezed my hand, and he nodded his head in Amelia's direction.

Several Japanese Fenerec males did their best to charm her, and for the most part, she proved immune to their posturing.

Jake asked, "See the short one in the corner?"

I did; the morning's basic briefing indicated he was the eldest of the Fenerec wolves, an unmated Alpha old enough to worry the Inquisition. "He's been quiet. Aiko warned me to step lightly around him."

"Not for the reason you think. He's an enforcer, much like Desmond, and he lives for puppies. He views us as abused puppies in dire need of strong familial structure, but Amelia distracted him. He doesn't view her as a puppy because his wolf is panting as much as the others are. If he can launch a successful courting, I bet Amelia would fit well with the Japanese packs. She wants the isolation they can offer her, and the packs here have quiet places off the beaten path she would like. And she's strong enough to stand up against him."

Uh oh. "Won't that cause us problems?"

"If we can get him to go with us, not at all. That should be one of our plays—to convince that Alpha to join our ranks for this. Amelia's been unstable for a while, and he's strong enough to keep her wolf on the right side of the line."

A chill crept through me at the thought of Amelia losing control of her wolf. "But she's been fine with us."

"We've been offering her stability. But how we've been living won't last forever. Once Greenwich is gone, her support structure will start to collapse." Jake winced, and then he heaved a sigh. Leaning closer to me, he whispered, "If you think something is amiss, squeeze my hand three times so I know to pay closer attention. We'll talk about what we learn when we are somewhere private."

I foresaw talking in a shower again to make certain we kept our secrets secret. I nodded before asking, “Do you think this wolf is a good match for Amelia?”

“I think he could be. She’s snapped and snarled at the other males, but he was able to talk to her for at least ten minutes without her driving him out of her space. That’s a good sign.”

It was? On second thought, I’d been shy around Jake for at least a year before warming up to him being my partner. I realized I’d done similar behavior with Jake, shying away from him without fully driving him from my territory or establishing more boundaries.

He’d given me just the right amount of space to learn how to work with me and around my skittish yet driven nature.

“Would I have gotten rid of you if I’d given you less time?” I teased.

“No.”

Wolves. “Does that make you more stubborn or stupid than the ones that Amelia’s driving out of her territory?”

“It makes me more patient.”

That I could believe. “Anyone else you want for the team?”

Jake considered those around us, who minded their own business and talked to others. “Just that Alpha. He’s pretty quiet, and the dossier I read on him indicates he’d rather just leave names out of the equation unless we become friendly with him. Just use sir on him; he understands it’s a term of respect in the United States.”

“When have you had time to go over anyone’s dossiers?”

“Mostly while you were sleeping,” he admitted. “When I’d wake up after a few hours of sleep, I’d work for an hour or two before sneaking back into bed. And before you worry, I’ve been getting sufficient sleep.”

When I wasn’t trying to get Jake out of his shirt, I’d mastered the art of worrying about him. My fox held some responsibility for that.

Upon clueing in he still struggled, she’d decided she needed to protect her

den. For the most part, he was our den.

I foresaw a battle of wills the next time I crossed paths with Jake's mother.

“Okay. You can fill me in on the work you've been sneaking in later. Anything else you think I should know?”

“Not offhand. Just treat it like you do when we have a black market and Inquisition calls, and you'll be fine. It wouldn't surprise me if there are a few black market ops in this group somewhere. They're sneaky, and they won't let us know they're in here. But they'll likely supply us, especially since the Inquisition is involved directly now.”

I'd wondered about the relationship between the Inquisition and the black market, but I hadn't been brave enough to ask. Questioning seemed a little too much like biting the hand that fed me, and they paid significantly better than the FBI. Of course, I left most of the finances to Jake, especially after the banking incident where I'd forgotten about opening accounts. Mellisa swore she'd conquer my issue with finances, but she was the first to admit it was minor compared to the other issues Jake and I battled.

Once we buried Greenwich, we'd have to talk about our future in the FBI—and if we realistically had one.

Would we be happy together working the violent crimes circuit? Unless something changed significantly, I doubted I would return to CARD. After learning the depths of my ma's betrayal, coping with my pa's death, confirming the truth behind their baby's slaughter, and the memories surrounding what had torn me and Jake apart and thrown us back together, I doubted either one of us would remain stable.

Therapy might help.

Eventually.

“How long do you think it'll take before we get this show on the road?” I muttered, aware every Fenerec in the room could likely hear me. The Alpha Jake wanted for Amelia glanced at us, and he shot a wolfish grin our way

along with a shrug.

After working with Aiko, I recognized the mannerisms as more American than Japanese, although they had their ways of communicating amusement.

It was just a little different.

“That felt rather American of him,” I informed my mate in the same whispered voice, aware he could hear us.

“He’s been to the United States a few times, and he’s a quick study. I’m fairly certain he speaks your language.”

Would the world survive through two people similar to me? Then again, if we could both get pointed in the right direction, our Greenwich problem would end in a spectacular and potentially explosive fashion. “Think they’ll give me access to explosives for this job?”

“Knowing what I know about you and explosives, I certainly hope not.”

I pouted at my mate. “But I want them to go out with a bang.” Jake shot a glare at me, and he issued one of his little snorts, which promised we’d both have a good time as soon as we got somewhere private. Pleased with my conquest, I added, “Ideally, they’ll never see me coming or going, and they won’t know what hit them.”

“That part of your plan I approve of and fully support.”

“Jake, what makes you think I have a plan?”

He heaved a patience-worn sigh, and I laughed at him.



THREE HOURS AFTER ARRIVING, Aiko clapped her hands, the sound soft and gentle. Somehow, she managed to capture everyone’s attention without needing to say a word, and the various conversations halted.

I appreciated her display of power, and I wondered if anyone else caught on to how much control she held over those in the room. In my parents’ case,

they respected her sufficiently to fall quiet and give her their attention.

After what my parents had been through, I doubted they would allow anyone else to hold power over them again, for better or worse. I would do my best to mitigate the damage that might cause, although I had no idea what I could do to help them.

My problems seemed so shallow and insignificant compared to theirs.

“Thank you.” Aiko performed a bow, neither deep nor shallow, but somewhere in between, leaving me to wonder what she conveyed. Only when everyone was in their proper place did she join us at the table. “It is time for us to make a plan. Everyone here has different and important data on Greenwich, and together, we will bring their reign of terror to an end. To best accomplish this goal, we must start at the very beginning.”

I turned my attention to my parents, and one by one, everyone else in the room clued in on what Aiko meant, ultimately following my lead. As Aiko remained silent, I asked, “Do you mean my family, Aiko-san?”

“I do mean your family—and everything that came before them. They ultimately lead to Greenwich and to you. While you and your mate are the lynchpins that will bring their cruel empire crashing down, this is truly their story, one many years in the making.”

No kidding; my parents had been alive during the time of the dinosaurs, although they had slept during their fall. One day, I might come to terms with their longevity—and with mine, assuming I survived.

My fox recoiled at even the thought of outliving Jake by millions of years.

Like me, she played for keeps, and she wanted to keep her wolf close for all eternity. Above even that, she wanted children to guard and care for, something we couldn't have until the ruins of Greenwich burned around us, the bodies of every participant growing cold, never to bother anyone again.

My mother stared at my father, and he offered her a gentle smile. He gave a nod, stared at me for a long moment, and then shifted in his seat to give

Aiko his full attention. “My love is ready to hunt, so I will handle the details she lacks patience for. My name is Rabten. I was born long before humanity rose, and we lived as foxes then. I favored the sea. My love came from the land. We became bound, a merging of both these forces, and we have wandered the world ever since. After the era of the dinosaurs came to an end and humanity rose, a group of young humans sought to become gods. They named themselves Yamāntaka. Our daughter has stripped them of their divinity and has named them Greenwich, after the child that began their downfall. Greenwich has sought to rule over other humans—and us—since the day they organized themselves. Their tradition has changed over the years, although their dark goals mostly remain the same.”

“Where did Greenwich originate?” the older of the Chinese delegates asked.

If I were asked to identify them in a crowd, I would only be able to state one of the men had some gray to his hair with a longer mustache than the other. Aware of my utter inability to distinguish Asian features beyond the very basics, I held judgment regarding their familial ties.

I would believe them to be brothers if told so, but I’d learned my eyes deceived me while abroad. I understood how to identify the key differences in Americans of all stripes and the various mixes that crossed my path in the FBI, but I hadn’t done sufficient learning about those from overseas.

I needed to change that.

I needed to change a lot of things.

Once again, my parents glanced at each other, and the burden fell to my father to answer the question. Sighing, he replied, “How familiar are you with ancient cultures?”

“Familiar enough, but I am open to new learnings,” the older of the men replied.

“Long before China began a cohesive nation, there were many clans or tribes—we’re not quite sure what they called themselves, really. We kept our

distance from the young humans, although we did help them from time to time. They had yet to cultivate civil behaviors among themselves and were prone to acting rather like animals. That changed. They developed culture—and beliefs. One of those beliefs was in higher powers. One of those higher powers eventually became Yamāntaka. Greenwich existed at the birth of those higher powers, although it did not take full root until later, taking up the name of the deity they wished to conquer and become.”

“Ancient fanatics, then,” he muttered.

“Not ancient. They are not supernatural. They just pass their quest for greed down from generation to generation, continuing their cause. The snake’s head has not been cut off—but in this case, I would rather incinerate every last one of them. We can cut their heads off before burning them. They are not phoenixes. They will not rise from their ashes. We will see to that. What is your name, and how do you plan to help our cause?”

“You can call me Eric, and my associate is Andrew.” After a moment, he added, “We have chosen American names for ourselves to make it easier for most here.”

Interesting. The Japanese had been patient whenever I’d struggled with pronouncing something, especially names. While I didn’t understand why the Chinese had chosen to Americanize their names, I opted against questioning it.

They had a reason, although I did not understand the reason.

“How do you plan on helping our cause?” my father asked, and something about his tone implied the Chinese spokesman walked on thin ice.

The battle of wills continued in silence for a few minutes before Eric sighed. “You are committed, then?”

“They will burn, and everyone allied with them will also burn. They have murdered our children. We have but one surviving daughter, and they tried to kill her, too—numerous times. Now that we have been set free, we will stop at nothing to see their threat removed. No mere country will stop us, not

now.”

Well, that would make our day interesting. While I lacked knowledge about the Chinese and their culture, I understood they took their power and pride seriously.

My father’s statement implied he would tear everything they valued down around them without remorse.

Eric considered my father, and then he rose and dipped into a bow. “Excellent. I will make certain my country knows your stance. We are prepared to assist you in weaponry, skilled personnel, escorts, translators, and access to vital records involving your daughter. We have tracked how your child was sent to the United States, along with information from interviewing witnesses. We have gotten some old camera footage of those who murdered your daughter’s escort. A family member, I presume.”

“Yes,” my mother stated, and her tone was as cold as my father’s.

Eric rose, bowed again, and retrieved two briefcases. One went on his chair, and he opened the other in front of him. He started by unfolding a map, positioning it in front of my parents. He plucked a laser pointer from the briefcase’s pen holder and directed everyone’s attention to a position on the map. “This is where your daughter’s paper trail begins. Are you aware of this location?”

My parents leaned over the map, examining the spot. My mother nodded first, followed by my father. She pointed at a mountain nearby. “Our sanctuary is there.”

“From our research, it had been the nearest town to your sanctuary, although it had been destroyed. I believe your relative meant to leave a clue about your daughter’s origins, hoping someone would discover the oddities in her paperwork. Unfortunately, from what we have learned from the Americans, their inability to read the documentation resulted in her paperwork being filed away; why translate the originating documents for an infant with other papers at that period of time? Those who smuggled her into

the adoption agency, and then later processed her adoption with the Johnson family, had done so with much skill.” Eric frowned, and he glanced at me. “And there is the matter of your original adoptive parents.”

“Yes,” I replied. “They were likely murdered by Greenwich. A crime they will pay for, one way or another. We’d initially thought they had killed them in a fashion meant to assign blame to the Fenerec, but upon meeting my parents, we understood that it was this group mimicking how they would dispatch their enemies.”

My father tilted his head and regarded me with a frown. “Do you have pictures of this?”

“I do,” Eric stated, turning and opening the other briefcase and pulling out an inch-thick file, which he handed over to my father. “This is courtesy of the American Inquisition. It came to light when the true time of your daughter’s transport to the United States had been discovered. The escort who brought her into the country is a legitimate agency worker, fooled by the paperwork that your relative and her accomplice provided.”

I wondered why they addressed my aunt as simply a relative. Was it some part of Chinese custom I failed to understand? Filing it away as something to ask about later, I leaned across the table, opened the folder for my father, and flipped to the images that had caught our attention. “It was these photos.”

My parents examined the images, and both nodded.

My mother offered a grim smile. “This was definitely done to mimic how we fight, although they made mistakes we would not. May their souls rest in peace and know our gratitude for their willingness to give you a home.” She took a few moments to sort through the pages, pausing at the medical report. “How tragic. What a sad ending for such honorable people. You are right. Greenwich will pay for these deaths.”

“It may have been a mercy for them,” I admitted, staring at the various conditions that would have left me bereft of my adoptive parents at an early age. “I don’t know how they would have handled my extended infancy.”

“That is a mystery we have not been able to solve,” Eric stated, and he retrieved the file and returned it to his briefcase. “There is a gap in your life we simply have no records of. Someone took care of you in the United States for several years before putting you in the care of the Johnsons. Someone who understood you would be an infant for an abnormal period of time. Someone involved with the selection of the Johnsons potentially assisted with covering up the tragic murder of their son. More importantly, this person coached your adopted mother on the oddities of your development, putting you in an environment you could be raised without drawing much suspicion.”

I considered the possibilities, and with the little I knew of my own childhood, I determined I had no plausible ideas. “But who would do that? Why?”

“It wouldn’t be someone loyal to Greenwich,” my father said, and the certainty in his voice was burdened with ancient grief. “They would have corrupted or killed you upon discovery. It would have had to be someone else—or a traitor within Greenwich’s numbers.”

Traitors came a dime a dozen, and the only thing that made one an ally or foe was the cause they fought for. “A traitor is always an option.”

“Or a surviving member of your family,” Mellisa stated, drawing everyone’s attention to her. My psychologist rose from her seat, pulled out her briefcase, and set it on the table beside my father. “These files came to me this morning, and I wasn’t sure what to do with them. This makes everything a little more clear. May I inquire if there are other types of foxes?”

“What do you mean?” my father asked with furrowed brows.

Mellisa pulled out a set of photographs, which she reached over and handed to me first. A series of grainy images from decades ago gave the man and woman features similar to my family’s, except their hair and skin were a golden bronze rather than porcelain pale. My eyes widened. Newer photographs showed a woman who could have been me—if only I had golden hair and dark brown tips rather than black hair with white tips. “She’s

like me.”

I passed the pages to my parents.

My mother covered her mouth with her hands, and tears welled up in her eyes.

“The Clan of the Air, Sisters of the Wind,” my father whispered, and he traced his finger over the woman’s face. “I thought they’d perished long ago.”

Another piece of the puzzle fell into place, and I understood a little better how a boy, like Jacob, might make the journey to his family.

He hadn’t been alone—and rather than use weapons of steel, like what had killed my first adoptive parents, his benefactor had used claws to dismantle her prey to protect the child who smelled like a wolf.

“There are foxes in the United States, and we had no idea,” Amelia said, and she joined my family in staring at the pictures. “And her coloration would not draw nearly as much attention as yours does, Karma. Is there any chance your aunt may have known of this fox?”

My mother shook her head, swallowed, and gathered her composure. “When the land split and the oceans swelled, we thought their clan had been taken by the earth and water. In our sanctuary is a shrine to them, meant to wish them well in their next lives. We have grieved for so many years, because while not our doing, we had not wished ill upon our brothers and sisters from another clan.”

Reaching over, my father clasped my mother’s shoulder. “We have time to make amends and meet our kin.”

“Is there a clan dedicated to fire?” I asked.

With a smile full of ancient secrets, my father nodded. “They have forgotten their heritage, and they live among humans. From time to time, we check on our fire-haired kin who have forgotten they are foxes. You’ve seen them before. Fire-red hair, eyes of emerald, with a connection to the land and sea. Those were once our proud kin, and we still cherish them for all they

have locked away their nature and have chosen shortened, mortal lives. They burn brightly. Perhaps one day one of them will rise from the flames.” His glance settled on Mellisa. “You benefit from their gift to humanity. It is from them you have won your witchcraft, for they chose a mortal’s life, spreading their magic among humans so that humanity might one day know of us.”

“Witchcraft is from us?” I blurted.

“Witchcraft, as you say it, is of the Earth. She has always wanted her children to thrive. Even the smallest insect might one day learn to speak to the wind or whisper flame into being, but what use does an insect have for wind or flame? They lack the ambition needed to control and bring their gifts to life. But magic has always been a part of the Earth. Some species simply made use of the Earth’s gift. But every human could become a witch with enough drive and will. The ability is there, embedded deep within them. It is not like the wolf spirits that haunt some at the table.”

“Haunt?” I asked with wide eyes.

“They’re spirits that haunt their host,” my mother stated, and she gave my mate her full attention. “Your spirit is a gentle little thing, the sweetness of a fruit without a rotten core. He is happiest cultivating seeds and growing gardens. You have both been bruised, but neither of you are broken. But you will become strong from the forging. You will need that strength to withstand our child. She is everything you are not—and you are everything she is not. This is what makes you a good pairing. You are a spirit of air and fire, and she is of the water and earth. Together, you make a whole. And much like our Earth, adversity is required to give you land to stand upon. But your spirit has found peace. You will as well, in time. Fight him a little less, embrace him a little more—and be not concerned about the spirit taking over. He will shy away from anything that might cause our child grief. And losing you both to the wildness would cause much grief. Nobody taught your people how to speak to the spirits. We can try, once this ends.”

Amelia sucked in a breath. “You can do that?”

“The spirit haunting you is tattered and worn, and she has not found peace yet. You fight to contain her because of the wildness, and you do not know how to heal those wounds.” My mother rose, considered Amelia, and eyed the other Fenerec. Her gaze settled on the Alpha Jake had isolated as a potential good match for her. “Your spirit is not as healthy as my daughter’s mate, but he is healthy enough. Come here.”

The wolf grinned but came over at my mother’s request. “Call me Bryce, as it irritates me trying to teach people how to pronounce the name my parents gifted to me.”

My mother captured Bryce’s hand, and her eyes narrowed. “You are old for a wolf.”

“I am.”

“Which era were you born in?” she asked, tilting her head while rubbing her fingers against his skin. “You are not old enough to have witnessed the rise and fall of mountains, but you carry with you the weight of ages.”

“What we know of China was rising during the time of my birth,” he confessed. “I usually answer with ‘old enough’, but for some reason, I doubt that will work with you.”

“It would not. How have you made peace with your spirit?”

“We swore, together, we would stand watch over that which we hold dear. Our land, our home, our people.”

I sat back in my chair, and I got the feeling when he said our people, he meant all people.

He seemed like the type.

“As it should be. Young girl, you should keep this one company. His spirit can help yours. You need the peace he has found. His purpose might also satisfy your spirit. You want to protect, but you never land in a place where you can protect. He will hold no such misconceptions. He knows the power of a woman, and he will not belittle yours.”

My father chuckled and freed the Alpha from my mother’s grip. “Next,

you'll be encouraging them to have many children, as little would heal that spirit more than many children underfoot, giving her many little someones to protect."

"It's only natural."

"Proximity and care will do for now," my father replied in a firm tone. "But yes, my love is right. Your spirit is tattered and is in need of the peace this wolf has found. I will think on how we can create a more harmonious state between human and spirit."

I eyed Jake with interest. "How is it you're balanced?"

My mother laughed. "It is because of you. His spirit has struggled, as has he, but he has found a harmonious balance with you. It is simple, my daughter. You have accepted him for everything he is and is not. He, in turn, has done the same. The marks of adversity are upon you, but neither of you allowed it to defeat you. You rose above it."

"From ashes," I muttered.

My mother sighed. "Sometimes, that is what it takes. It is hard to know when to cease walking along a hard path. You both opted to continue the journey despite its perils. You have found balance as a result. And for as long as his wolf spirit remains whole, he will walk through the ages with you. Neither of you would have that strength without that adversity." With a hint of steel in her eyes, my mother glared at my mate. "I will have words with the ones who forced such a tempering upon you, but they served their purpose, so I will leave it at words. There is no need to add to the tragedy of your forging."

Jake eyed Mellisa.

"Don't look at me like that, Jake. I only told her you were a submissive puppy nobody realized was submissive because you are the product of two dominant people who were convinced they would have a dominant child. It took some explaining, but they understand the roles of the pack now. We will be checking to see if you're actually an Omega, however. That's the only

theory I have for how you, someone displaying submissive tendencies, could withstand so much abuse without breaking underneath it.” Mellisa rolled her shoulders. “The state of your wolf spirit supports the theory you defy submissive roles. But you wouldn’t be a classic Omega.”

“I don’t fix things in the pack or bring stability,” Jake muttered.

Mellisa graced my mate with one of her rare, loving smiles. “Oh, you do, Jake. You just do it in a way nobody expects. But we’re learning that people defy classification as often as not. I suspect you were, in truth, born a submissive, but exposure to Karma has been changing you, and you have, over time, become an Omega.”

My father cleared his throat. “I do not understand this Omega term. Can you explain it, please?”

“In Fenerec society, wolves are always at the risk of running wild. Only one class of wolf can avoid this. Running wild means the wolf spirit has taken over and has eradicated the humanity in the Fenerec. This is not reversible that we know of. Omegas are immune to this. There is one Alpha who was born as a submissive who can run wild but his wolf spirit and human nature rebalances after calming. He is not precisely the most stable of Alphas, but he is unique.”

“Richard Murphy of Yellowknife?” Bryce asked.

“Yes, that is the Alpha I speak of. Nobody is willing to do what was done to him because it was cruel. But his wolf’s spirit is different.” Mellisa dug through her briefcase, pulling out several photographs.

I winced at the state of the two bodies, which had been ripped to shreds. As far as I could tell, they’d been killed in a cabin, which had been painted with blood.

“This is what happens to anyone near a Fenerec when their wolf runs wild. In this case, these are the bodies of Richard Murphy’s parents. Richard went wild after one of his parents struck his mate. He killed them before dragging his mate away to a safe den. He attempted to care for his mate,

although he was trying to use a wolf's knowledge, eyes, and heart rather than a human's. It went about as well as you might expect from a wild animal attempt to care for a human. He was spared because his mate protected him when her family found them. The Inquisition exists to protect humanity from this reality—and the reality of witches abusing their powers.”

My parents examined the images, and my mother pressed her fingertips to the photographs. “These wolves had tattered spirits, too—I can feel the echoes of their sins. That poor child.”

My eyes widened, as did everyone else's at the table.

Jake recovered first, and he leaned closer to have a look at the photographs. “You can feel things through the photos?”

“Rabten is better at it than I am.” My mother slid the photographs over. “What can you see?”

“I will need sand and water for this.”

Aiko bowed and left the room, returning shortly after with a tray of sand and a small cup of water.

My father pressed his hands together and bowed his head, breathing deeply. After a few minutes, he relaxed, placing the fingertips of his right hand against the tray and resting his palm over the photograph of the bodies.

The sands swirled and took the shapes of a man, woman, and two children. The older of the children, a teen verging on becoming an adult, stood between his parents and the younger child, who could barely toddle.

Whenever the adults moved, the teen grimaced.

“The older was born with his wolf's spirit, but he was a quiet and reclusive child. He lived to please, but he could never please those who had given him life. His wolf spirit wept, for he too wished to help but could not.” My father lifted his hand from the tray, and the sand fell.

“This is Nicole's mate?” I asked.

Mellisa nodded. “He is.”

I understood, a little better, about Charles Desmond and his daughter—

and why they were as they were.

They refused to do what his parents had done.

Jake leaned back in his chair. “Huh. That cringing child was Richard when he was young?”

My father returned his hand to the tray, and the scene changed. I recognized the child depicted, although Richard had been much younger.

It only took a few minutes of my father displaying the sort of abuse I would have been tempted to murder over to get a better understanding of what they’d meant by trying to force a submissive into dominant behavior.

They’d attempted to beat the submissiveness out of him.

It hadn’t worked.

My heart broke for the child, who never should have been treated with such brutality. “That is so horrible.”

“This is the sort of thing Greenwich would do to cultivate a soul. This is what we fight. After this is finished, we may be able to help bring peace to his wolf’s spirit. It will not undo the damage, but we may be able to bring him some peace. He was bent, but he was not broken.” My father lifted his hand from the photograph and the tray, and the sands once again fell. “Cameras are interesting things. They capture more than pictures when used. They can also catch the echo of lost spirits such as these. I will meditate tonight, and I will offer my wish to the Earth that she never allow these spirits to walk this land again.”

“Do you have the photographs of my first adoptive parents, Mellisa?”

“I do.” She pulled them out and offered them to my father. “I know what she wants to ask.”

My father offered me a smile, and the sadness of it touched his eyes. “I can tell you what you want to know.”

This time, he did not make use of the tray, instead resting the fingertips of both hands on to the photograph. “I can confirm that mortal men murdered these two souls, and they died with a wish in their heart to protect you, their

beloved daughter. When their spirits left their bodies, they still fought.” My father’s head tilted to the side. “They still fight. These are not contented spirits ready to move on. Yes, we have an ally here, if we wish to make use of them.”

The thought of my adoptive parents wandering the world as ghosts chilled me. “They’re ghosts?”

“That is as good a term as any for it. They are still present in a way we can reach. That is the power of love, my child. They did not have you long, but they loved you from the moment they saw you. They would have been good parents.” His cheek twitched. “But not for long. Their bodies were not well. They did not know this.”

That matched what we knew of them. “Can we make sure they rest well?”

“You are such a caring spirit.” My father sighed, and he picked up the picture, examining the ruins of their bodies. “These souls require closure, and the only closure they will get is through the end of Greenwich.”

“We haven’t done that before.” My mother rubbed her hands together. “That’s the one thing we’ve never tried. We’ve never tried balancing the scales through the ghosts of those who lost everything to these monsters.”

“It would be dangerous,” my father warned.

“Anything worth doing often is. We would need vessels.”

Aiko paled, and her eyes widened. “You mean to raise the dead?”

“Oh, no. We mean to give spirits purpose and direction. We cannot raise the dead. Nobody can do that. That is the one truth we must all abide. But there is no rule about reaching for those spirits and making requests. The Earth would appreciate giving her lost children a chance to rest.” With a wicked gleam in her eye, my mother rose from her seat and went to Eric, eyeing his briefcase. “Does that contain more pictures?”

“Of Greenwich’s deceased victims?” The man rummaged through both of his briefcases, pulling out a stack of photographs. “We have pulled out pictures of all cases we were not sure were connected. I don’t know if this is

what you need, but this is what we have to offer.”

My mother accepted the stack before turning to Mellisa. “And your Inquisition?”

The psychologist pulled out her phone. “I only brought those pictures, but I can get more and have them here shortly. Do you need prints? Can you do the same thing on a phone?”

My parents eyed Mellisa’s phone with interest.

“I don’t know.” My father shrugged. “I have never owned a phone, and I do not know how they work. I have used them, but they were never mine.”

Mellisa tapped on the screen. “This is a different picture of the bodies.”

After accepting the phone, my father stared at the picture, and he rested his fingers upon the screen. “Ack.”

Laughing, Mellisa leaned over to see what he did, and she tapped a few times. “Try again.”

He did, and after a moment, he nodded. “I see their spirits.”

Bryce strolled over, peering at the phone. “Can you use those spirits?”

“How so?” my father asked.

“It has been an honor to work with and meet Richard. He did not deserve what was done to him. Can you make those spirits pay for their crimes before they are eradicated?”

“Do you want revenge or justice?” my mother inquired.

“I’d accept either.” In Bryce’s tone, I heard stone and ice—and a willingness to kill.

“We can secure justice, but it would come at the price of vengeance,” she warned.

“Justice will have to be enough.”

My father grunted and regarded my mother through narrowed eyes.

“We will need some time and supplies, but we can begin with these two spirits. And if they were associated with Greenwich, we will learn the truth of that, too.”

“What do you need?” Eric asked, and he pulled out a pad of paper and a pen.

Aiko did the same, and the coldness of her expression promised the woman would play her part in retribution somehow.

I would need to ask Charles Desmond some questions about his son-in-law and those who knew him.

After a few moments, my father said, “I am going to need as many photographs of these people, living or dead, as possible—and if we can acquire their most prized possession, that would help, too.”

“That would be Richard Murphy,” Mellisa stated, her tone as frigid as Aiko’s expression.

My mother shook her head. “No. I will not have that poor child hurt any more by these monsters. Photographs will have to do. I will not have us bring even more harm to him. He has been hurt enough. We will make do with photographs alone if needed—and the fury only the loving can possess.”

FOURTEEN



"I owe you a debt."

THE MEETING ADJOURNED, giving us five hours to ourselves in our swanky hotel room to do with as we pleased. Someone had brought food up for us before we arrived. I'd grabbed enough to satisfy my stomach before Jake fell on the rest like some starved beast. To my amusement, within twenty minutes, he passed out in bed, giving me a chance to appease my curiosity.

I called Charles Desmond.

"What's wrong?" the man asked, his voice burdened with lost sleep.

"I'm sorry for waking you, Mr. Desmond, but I had some questions about Richard."

"About Richard?" The enforcer grunted, murmured an apology to his mate, and a few moments later, he asked, "What's going on?"

"We found my biological parents. The Inquisition had photographs of Richard's parents after their deaths to compare to how my parents might kill versus how a Fenerec does, I think."

"Ah. Yes. We took pictures of the scene. There wasn't much else we could do with the bodies in that condition. That must have come as a shock to you."

"Not really. I'm just as lethal." Bit by bit, I came to terms with the lives I'd ended on my quest for vengeance. "My parents are going to do something we might regret."

“What’s going on?”

“I believe they’re going to weaponize the spirits of Richard’s parents against Greenwich. My parents are furious about what they saw in the pictures—that goes beyond just the photos. They saw the souls, I think.”

“Seers happen. We have a few in the Inquisition, although few see things so clearly. All right. Nothing more than what those assholes deserve. I do appreciate the warning. Weaponize those bastards against Greenwich all you want. If your parents can toss in some torture while they’re at it, it would not be unjustified.”

I marveled at how many people could love one man so much. “All right. I just wanted to warn you. I’ve learned to not doubt when my parents say they will do something.”

“Do you like your parents?”

“I do. But they have had so much tragedy in their lives. Greenwich murdered my brothers and sisters.”

“The rumor of litters is true, then?”

“It is.”

“And your mate’s thoughts on this?”

I considered my sleeping mate, wondering at the difference between a submissive and an Omega. “My parents can see the wolf spirit, and they’ve offered to help fix what’s wrong with Richard. Something about what his parents did to him.”

Charles Desmond sucked in a breath. “They can do that?”

“They think so. Apparently, I did something to my mate that helped him, too.”

“Something?”

“It came up when discussing Richard and about how he was forced to become a dominant after being a submissive.”

“The same thing that was happening, albeit accidentally, to your mate.”

I winced at the reminder. “Yes. But I apparently changed him. Mellisa

said he might be an Omega now.”

“That would explain a lot, including his many struggles. Omegas are rare, and they often have difficult times, but I have never heard of someone becoming an Omega before. They are either born one or they are not. Your Jake was not an Omega before. Submissive, yes. But not an Omega.”

“He seems to be one now.”

“You somehow changed his wolf’s spirit?”

“I must have fixed it somehow, like my parents plan on fixing Richard.”

Charles Desmond chuckled. “Richard would be far better off as an Omega, yes. He could still work with his pack as the Alpha, but he wouldn’t be jerked in every direction. He’d be able to act as an Alpha with far more ease—with no risk of breaking under the strain. If your parents can do that to Richard, it would help a lot. He doesn’t want to be an Alpha. But being an Omega? He would break himself to pieces to help others. That’s part of him having been born so submissive. Your parents think they can fix those problems?”

“That’s my understanding of the situation.”

“It’s something we can discuss later. I expect it might be wise to leave it alone for a while. Richard is in the middle of some things right now, and adding more to his plate would not be wise. But if they’re willing to work with him, after that business is done, I would be appreciative.”

I smiled. “I’ll talk to them after we deal with Greenwich, and if they can’t help him, maybe I can.”

“I owe you a debt.”

Well, a debt would make my request easy. “You won’t have to worry about that for long, then. I have something you can do for me.”

“What do you need?”

“I need you to get your hands on every single photo of someone we think was killed by Greenwich. Mellisa is trying to work with the Inquisition on it, as are the Chinese. I suspect you might have more information accessible,

though.”

The man’s low chuckle warned me of trouble on the horizon. “I have an entire collection of photos. It’s been a project I’ve been working on with the Seattle pack. If you’re on a hunt for old ghosts, we can provide. We have photos from the past sixty years. There are thousands of them, and they’re all brutal. I just want to warn you.”

“I’m not sure how to get that many photos sent over,” I admitted.

“I’ll handle that. Are you doing better now?”

“I am, thank you. Coming to Japan was a good idea. We’re making progress.”

“Considering you’ve met your parents, I’d say you’re doing more than just making progress. Any time you need a safe space, just give me a call, all right? Especially if your mate has become an Omega. I’ve handled Omegas before, and they do need a careful hand, especially if they’re in an unstable emotional state.”

However much I disliked acknowledging it, my mate counted as unstable on the emotional front. “I’ll do that. My parents are planning on having a talk with Jake’s parents. I’ve been informed they’ll be alive after the talk, but I’m expecting a great deal of trouble on the horizon.”

“Nothing more than they deserve. I’ll come referee, and I’ll talk with your parents so they know how far to take it with them. What’s the best way to get a hold of them?”

“Probably through Mellisa. The Japanese contacts ultimately brought my parents into it, but Mellisa has been working with them. I think my parents need our therapist more than we do.”

“Were they able to clarify some of your biological issues?”

I sighed. “My parents count their lifespan in millions of years.”

“Well, that’s a little different. Fenerec can get old, but that’s skirting on the ridiculous. It explains a lot about your aging, though. How many brothers and sisters do you have?”

“None. Greenwich killed them all.”

Charles Desmond huffed, and he puffed, and if I left him alone to his huffing and puffing, he might work his way up to blowing something down—or someone up. “Even more reason to make sure this outfit is destroyed, then. If your parents like children, we can bring them out here and let them see a bunch of our puppies. And if they decide to have another litter, they can do so in my territory, where nobody is going to hurt them or their little ones. It’ll be trivial to get the Inquisition’s help with that.”

“I’ll let them know about your offer.”

“Do. At the very least, bring them my way so they can talk with someone older—not nearly as old as them, but old enough to understand how times change.”

“You believe they’re that old?”

“I do. When I was but a pup, we still had old things wandering the world. But they’ve all since died away or disappeared into legend and myth. It’s a way of life. I’ll leave you thinking about that for a while. I will get started on these photos. You should have them in an hour or two, and I’ll contact Mellisa to make sure you both have access to them. If you need anything else, give me a call.”

The enforcer hung up, and I considered my phone for a long time. Shrugging, I texted Mellisa with a warning that Charles Desmond would be hooking us up with his collection of photographs and that I was going to take a nap with my mate before the next phase of work began.

Without waiting for her reply, I crawled into bed with Jake, cuddled close, and wondered what might have been if only Greenwich hadn’t been involved with our lives.



AMELIA WOKE us up through dumping us off the bed with some help from Bryce, who laughed at us.

Jake tried to burrow under the blankets and pillows, and I contemplated strangling my friend.

With a sly smile, the bitch said, “You’ve been down and out for fifteen hours. As you did some good work during the break, Mellisa thought you deserved some rest. She isn’t surprised you’re fatigued, but if you sleep much longer, you’ll screw your sleep schedule up. It’s morning, and you need to have breakfast. As I have some mercy, we brought it in here for you to have. We brought extra, as you two had devoured every scrap of your last meal.”

“Thanks. I’d only meant to close my eyes for a few minutes.” I stretched, yawned, and poked my mate. “We might have some work to do.”

“Tomorrow,” he mumbled.

As I was usually the one trying to avoid getting out of bed, I narrowed my eyes. “Are you not feeling well?”

“I’m fine, Karma. But unless the work is more than talk about how other people are going to do the work, I’d rather go back to bed.”

I chuckled, as once Jake woke up, he’d be eager to do a great deal in bed, none of which involved actual sleep. “Charles Desmond sent us some pictures. We might get to work through the examination of brutally murdered bodies and related evidence.”

That got my husband to come out from under the covers. “That sounds like actual work.”

“We’re the fighters for this jaunt, Jake. We will have to be patient until it’s time to fight, then we have guns and other weapons available to us. But if we want to get to the fighting, we have to deal with the rest of the work.”

Jake’s eyes flashed gold. “You have my attention.”

Amelia laughed. “You’re not the only one itching for a fight. Karma, your parents are pleased that you were sleeping on the job, as they wanted to avoid you seeing just what they were doing with those first two ghosts. It was pretty

ugly. I wish I'd been uninvited to witness it.”

“What happened?” I demanded, getting up off the floor and helping the Fenerec restore the bed to rights.

“Your mother summoned the spirits, and your father bound them to a pair of komainu.” Amelia gulped. “You know those guardian statues we saw throughout Tokyo?”

“The dogs?” I asked.

“Yes, those. They're called komainu in Japan, and as Aiko seemed to find their penance fitting and the Chinese delegation turned various shades of green upon seeing what your parents were up to, we've decided to go with the Japanese naming of them. Your parents have bound them to become komainu, and they have been given very specific directions on what they must do if they want any hope of restful slumber. It was presented as a single chance to balance their scales or be put through an eternity of suffering. The spirits believed them.”

I would, too. “All right. So, they animated these dog statues with their spirits?”

“Yes, that is correct. They were also questioned about Greenwich. That's part of why you got to sleep through the night without anyone bothering you.”

“Were they involved?” Jake demanded, getting to his feet.

“We think so, but not directly. The Murphys were smart enough to know Normals couldn't find out about them, and the Greenwich operatives who talked to them were Normals. From what we know, they're all Normal. So, these operatives were asking questions about men and women who could become foxes. To avoid punishment, they went through our lineup of potential Greenwich operatives. We got a hit, and Inquisition operatives are making a move to bring them into custody. Well, some into custody. A few are being assassinated for their crimes, quietly and without remorse. The Murphys were able to provide unassailable proof of wrongdoing. They're

Normals, but they're Normals working with Greenwich, and they were in a position to use weapons we do not wish any rogues to be using."

While that went against my belief in a fair trial, I also understood why the Inquisition—or the government—might wish to act in such a way.

Weapon codes and technology, like the source of the Greenwich kidnapping, could end everything as we knew it and launch the world into a state of war. If the Murphys had been able to provide proof of wrongdoing, then I would remain silent.

The deaths would bother me, but the blood of innocents would remain off my hands, and I could live with that.

To make myself feel a little better about the situation, I focused on what was important. One pebble could bring an entire mountain down, and I nodded my satisfaction over having gotten a lead. "Anything else?"

"We got confirmation that the rogue Fenerec and witches outside of the Inquisition are not involved—or they weren't before the Murphys were killed."

"The Inquisition hasn't been infiltrated?"

"While there are some rogue Fenerec and witches who have snuck in, they're doing good work and haven't gone against the Inquisition. We have names, and they'll be quietly apprehended, talked to, and sanctioned if they start talking. Greenwich hasn't made it into the Inquisition because they only use Normals as far as we can tell. Witches can tell if someone is a witch or a Normal, so it's easy to keep Normals out. The FBI has been infiltrated, though, and the Murphys were quite helpful in revealing who our traitors are. We know who betrayed you and Jake." Amelia checked her watch. "I suspect they had a tragic accident roughly an hour ago."

I winced. "So much for due process."

"It was better this way. Your parents would have hunted them and killed them in a far more brutal fashion. It was too risky to do a live capture. A single mistake would have tipped off the American Greenwich branch. The

Inquisition took out all of the identified operatives within a twenty-minute window using a variety of methods, all of which are quick and painless. Their fate would have been far, far worse.”

I could understand the route of mercy, although I questioned what proof they had. “How did they confirm the wrongdoing?”

“Your parents were able to conjure sand versions of the killers. We did not show them who had done the killings. They replicated the murder scenes in sand. And your father brought in colored sands to make it as lifelike as possible. He recreated the scenes, and Inquisition operatives were able to match the killers with the FBI infiltrators. Your father then worked some magic, which tired him significantly but confirmed their guilt.”

“What magic?”

Amelia winced, and she glanced at Bryce, who answered, “To a wolf spirit’s eyes, the spirits of the guilty will glow a blood red. The aura appears to witches as well. He linked the spirits of the killers from the past to the present, and he then permitted us to seek out justice however we sought fit. In China and Japan, witches have similar magic but not to quite the scale your parents do. There was no doubt of guilt when they were killed. We asked for justice, and we received it. The American law enforcement agencies and governments should be clean of Greenwich operatives. A few in China fell, but not many. The Chinese handled that. There were none in Japan they could find. Japan didn’t have many photos to work with, however.”

“In fifteen hours?” I blurted, stunned at the idea that so many organizations could clean house in such a short period of time.

Amelia and Bryce exchanged looks, and Bryce shrugged.

Amelia regarded me with a solemn expression and said, “The black market helped, and the Inquisition had plenty of operatives eager and ready to shed blood. It was quite simple to motivate them. All we had to do was tell them these people helped to kill infants shortly after birth. And that is the truth.”

“How many?”

Sighing, Amelia sat at the table and leaned back in the chair, angling her head until she stared at the ceiling. “In total, fifty-six had infiltrated the FBI, there were ten police officers in three states, and two government officials. There were also some military agents who dealt with things like weapon codes. We’re not cleared to say how many, but they are all confirmed to be dead. The government officials were fairly low ranked, and their official cause of death was from a crash involving a drunk driver. The driver was not drunk but rather a Fenerec with an interest in moving to Europe. He volunteered to handle the matter, and those officials were well known to go places together without an escort. The Fenerec suffered from moderate to severe injuries but will officially be pronounced dead. In reality, once he has recovered, he will go to Europe for a few decades.”

“Nobody else was injured?”

“Nobody else was injured. There were no innocent bystanders injured in any of the hits. There was one damaged car, but the Inquisition will take care of replacing it,” she assured me.

“But in fifteen hours?”

“I’ll answer this one,” Bryce said, and he joined Amelia at the table. “It didn’t take long once we had confirmation. A lot of the people on the lists were already under watch for suspicious behavior. The Americans just didn’t realize they were part of the Greenwich operations. The military traitors were the truly dangerous ones, as they had access to weapon codes. While Greenwich is still a threat, especially after infiltrating the United States that far, your parents have relaxed since the assassinations. The direct threats to you have been addressed. There are surely more Greenwich members in the United States, but your parents view them as trash ready to be taken out. Their souls are marked and will remain marked until the day they die. Any Inquisition member will be able to see the truth of their crimes in their aura, and they will be dealt with.”

“Lesson learned: my parents are absolutely terrifying when angry.”

“Now that they know you are alive, they have the will to do what is needed. They want a future with you in it, no matter what the cost is to them.” Amelia lowered her head, muttered some curses, and met my gaze. “The pictures you secured played a huge part of this, by the way. Where did you get them?”

“From an Inquisition enforcer,” I admitted. “Richard Murphy’s father-in-law.”

Bryce’s eyes widened. “That explains a lot. Your parents found those pictures to be rich with energy. Desmond has a reputation of being a relentless hunter, especially when he feels there was a wrong done. He must have been championing for you since the London shooting to have that much pictorial evidence. He likes the underdog—and to him, you would have been the ultimate underdog. Then to add in your struggles with your mate?”

Jake growled.

“Down, Jake,” I ordered, and knowing it irritated him, I snapped my fingers and pointed at the floor.

To my amusement, he came and sat at my feet and leaned against my leg. “Sorry.”

“He just told the truth. We did struggle. Greenwich is part of the reason we struggled. And the rest of the reason we struggled is very sorry and will do their best to be better parents. You don’t have to be sorry for getting growly. Frankly, it’s been a while since you’ve been growly, so you should do that a little more, but not to the nice Alpha who is trying to brief us on what happened while we were napping.” I reached down and ruffled his hair. “Better?”

“I could use some more sleep,” he confessed.

“Are you sure you’re feeling well?” I bent over to check his temperature, determining he seemed about the same as usual.

“We’ve been shirking on sleep for a while,” he reminded me.

“Go back to bed, then. I’ll fend off the hordes and protect your sleep,” I promised.

To my amusement, Jake flopped on to the newly made bed, and within a few breaths, he snored.

“He’s not getting out of bed today,” I informed Amelia. “I’m going to eat all that food, and after eating that much, I’m not getting out of bed today, either. When are we scheduled to go to China?”

“Tomorrow,” she replied. “Think we can get away without them, Bryce?”

“I’ll just verify the wolf is exhausted and the fox will bite our faces off if we disturb her wolf. It’s not the first or last time a pair has messed up a schedule because of fatigue. They won’t be the last. And their trip to Japan so far has been less than restful. Don’t worry about it. I’ll try to get a concise version of a brief put together for you for tomorrow morning. We’ll come in to check on you a little later.” Bryce rose, and he herded Amelia to the door. “Eat everything you can, and someone will be by to take away what you don’t finish.”

FIFTEEN



“Those bastards killed kids on purpose, didn’t they?”

IAN MALCOLM, my first supervisor in CARD, had been a member of Greenwich, as had two members of the quad I’d been assigned to. Of the lot, I would have suspected Brent over Andrew or Jerry, but he’d been the only one in their little assembly innocent of wrongdoing.

As such, Brent still lived.

After my departure from CARD, I hadn’t followed what had happened to any of them.

Ultimately, Greenwich had been responsible for what had thrown Jake and me back together—and for what had torn us apart.

Mellisa waited for me to process the news, keeping an eye on my sleeping spouse, who’d decided to catch up on lost sleep all at once. I’d woken him for meals, but beyond gorging, coming for some cuddles, and using the washroom, he’d returned to bed.

He hadn’t stirred when Mellisa had come in, and as long as we kept our voices down, I suspected he’d sleep through the entirety of the conversation. Still, once he found out the news, he would not handle it well.

“Those bastards killed kids on purpose, didn’t they?”

“It appears they would slack on their cases just enough to make certain Greenwich’s targets could not be recovered,” my therapist replied. “It matches their method. CARD only needed to buy them long enough to get

word if they wanted the child recovered or killed. If the child was recovered, it was only because their parents agreed to their terms. Otherwise, they killed the child in retaliation, like they would have killed Annabelle Greenwich. And you, although they did not realize they had invited death to their door.”

Fury, hotter and stronger than anything I’d ever experienced before, burned through me and reached right down to my bones. I hadn’t asked what had happened after I’d fled with the baby. In some ways, I wanted the closure, but in others, I feared our inability to peel answers out of the bastards had cost us so much.

Annabelle lived, and I forced myself to be content with my victory over Greenwich, however accidental that victory happened to be.

Another question bothered me, but the answer wouldn’t torment me, so I asked, “And Brent?”

“After you left CARD, he requested a transfer to a quad, one with a different supervisor. After his transfer, his recovery percentage immediately increased threefold. This was why the other members of the team and your supervisor were on watch, but until now, there was nothing we could do to prove anything. Well, we have all the proof we need. Our proof wouldn’t hold up in Normal courts, but between the appearance of the aura, the circumstantial evidence, and Brent’s immediate improvement upon transfer, I’m confident of the truth. But this is the time we have a talk about the case that broke you in CARD.”

“Michelle Gianni.”

I would never forget being too late to save that little girl. If only I’d been ten minutes earlier, she may have survived. One day, I might forgive myself for what I hadn’t been able to change.

“Upon learning that CARD team had been infiltrated, Mr. Gianni was questioned again. It has been determined that Michelle’s father refused to give Greenwich confidential information. Michelle paid for his refusal with her life. Greenwich made a mistake with him. That man is now our ally, as he

would do anything to bring her killers to justice. The Inquisition reached out, disguising themselves as CARD members, and offered closure to the man through linking the kidnapping and murder of his daughter with the Greenwich operative in question. Within five minutes, Mr. Gianni sang more than any canary. He hadn't assumed the operative had been behind it. They'd waited for a period of over a year before retaliating. Then they waited a few months before attempting to get confidential information out of him again." Mellisa reached out across the table and gave my hand a squeeze. "It's important you understand that there was nothing you could do to save that little girl. Greenwich had three of five team members in their pocket, and their orders were to make sure CARD was too late. Their supervisor's method of doing this was benching you. But you almost got to them despite obstruction. I don't know if this will make you feel better, but Brent was questioned by a talented fire witch. He is as tortured over the deaths as you."

"Which is why he requested a transfer." However much I disliked Brent, I could understand and accept his status as a fellow victim. "Was he doing the best he could?"

"The witch assigned to questioning him thinks so. He will be going into therapy, especially once news goes down the wire that his former partners and supervisor were killing kids on purpose. The Inquisition opted to frame Greenwich for their murders, staging the killings as retaliation for a botched obstruction. It will destabilize CARD for a while, but the organization will recover—and there will be better vetting of members moving forward. That leads me to a request."

I grabbed a piece of jerky, something Mellisa had brought to give me something to gnaw my frustrations out on, and went to town on it so I wouldn't start chittering. After working out the worst of my nerves, I asked, "What request?"

"The FBI wants you working with CARD again, but in an organization role initially. With a significant number of members having been outed as

part of Greenwich and eliminated, the uppers want to revamp the program. You're ideal for this due to your drive to safeguard kids—and your experience with Greenwich. You've directly witnessed how plants can obstruct an investigation. They want you to go over their protocols and make recommendations for changes to prevent this from happening again. It may require you going out in the field. Jake will be partnered with you along with two Inquisition operatives. Those operatives are currently undergoing training. Your supervisor will be Kelvin Daniels. He knows how you tick, he likes you, and he's eager to see what you can really do when put in a position to shine. He knows you have baggage, and he's going to have a team of psychologists, myself included, on hand to assist the entire team.”

Mellisa presented my old dreams on a silver platter, and I struggled to determine if I could handle being the woman I had once been.

“We'll do it,” Jake announced from the comfort of bed.

I put some serious thought into throwing the jerky at him. “We will?”

“We will. You can't undo what your ma did. You can't fix what that asshole supervisor did. You can't change the past. But you can change the future. I should be able to see the auras your parents inflicted on the Greenwich members directly responsible for the deaths pictured. You might be able to, too, for all we know. But if we missed anyone in Greenwich, we might be able to stop them—and we can better protect CARD from being sabotaged again.” Jake sat up and stretched, reminding me of a contented cat rather than a wolf. “You like Daniels, I like Daniels, but there's a problem. My parents are heavily involved, even in New York.”

“Kelvin has accepted a transfer to Seattle, which is where you will be headquartered. The issue of your pack will be addressed later. After this mess is handled here, there will be a one year training period, which you'll spend traveling the United States, evaluating most FBI resident agencies for Greenwich infiltrators, and participating in actual training. Once that period is over, you'll be resettled in Seattle. It's uncertain if you'll join Desmond's

pack or Seattle's pack, but my current recommendation is a pack transfer. This will allow more therapy with your family to take place without any obstructions on the professional front." Mellisa smiled at my mate. "How are you feeling?"

"Much better, thank you."

I glared at my spouse. "You said you were feeling fine!"

"I was tired, Karma. Really. I was fine. I just needed some sleep." Jake got out of bed, came over, and leaned down so he could give me a kiss. "I woke up when Mellisa came in, but I decided to eavesdrop because I could."

"That's probably for the best," I admitted. It'd been bad enough working my way through the shock of so many betrayals with my psychologist watching me like a hawk. Jake, had he been an active participant, would have found some way to compound the problem. Sighing over the insanity of the situation, I reached for him, wrapped my arms around his waist, and hugged him. "What if I break?"

"You'll have a team of psychologists on hand, a stable pack to offer support, and I'll be at your back every step of the way. If you break, we'll get the emotional super glue out, and we'll use it until you're put back together again. It's like riding a horse. You need to get back into the saddle, else the fear takes over until it grows to the point you can't climb on that horse no matter how hard you try. After the reorganization, if you want to go back to violent crimes, we can. But I think you need to conquer this. And this time, you won't be obstructed. But now we know, for certain, that you were obstructed. It wasn't in your head."

I'd worried about that, and I'd harbored more than a few doubts. After taking a few calming breaths, I nodded. "All right. What about the Corvette, though? I wanted to steal it."

"You can still test the garage security," Mellisa promised. "But you'll get the Corvette as part of your hiring package. I already discussed that with the FBI, and they're willing to offer it to you as your official vehicle, and when

it's retired, you will take ownership of it. I cited emotional attachments, and considering the circumstances, it was a simple enough arrangement to make. You can do some road tripping in the Corvette with its trunk space, too."

With the bribe of the Corvette dangling in front of me, I struggled to concoct reasons to refuse the job offer. "And Daniels is really going to be our boss?"

"He will be. He's been fully briefed on the situation, including Jake's probable transition to an Omega, which will be invaluable in CARD." Mellisa engaged my mate in a staring contest. "I will be changing therapy strategies with you, however, as we do not treat Omegas as we do submissive wolves, which explains a few of the hang-ups we have been having. You're free from the restrictions most submissives face, but you'll never be a true dominant, not like your parents wanted for you. However, you're going to be most comfortable supporting Karma. But that has been the case since you partnered with her, right? You've always been working to support her, even when you had to pretend you have steel in your spine while you don't."

Jake sighed. "It makes sense. What would have happened to a submissive in my situation?"

"He would have broken, Jake," our therapist replied in a quiet voice. "And while you have struggled, you have not been broken—or if you did break, whatever magic Karma has worked on you put you back together again. And when I'm honest with myself, you would make a terrible dominant and a worse Alpha. You don't want to submit, but you want to help. You also don't want to dominate anyone in order to help."

As I had no idea how to support my mate, I gave him a tighter squeeze.

He rested his hand on my shoulder. "Do you think the Inquisition will try to use Karma's parents?"

"To help Richard? Certainly. For other Fenerec? No. They've established their boundaries at my recommendation. I am trying to convince them they do not need to adopt Richard, but after witnessing his past with their magic, I

expect he'll be considered one of their children. I am of the opinion their magic works best when love is involved, echoing the Earth's love for all her children. They have seen Richard's spirit and want to repair the damage that has been done to him. Other Fenerec aren't damaged. They are as they are for a reason. But they will likely be consulted to lower the numbers we lose to the wildness." Our therapist grinned. "As I expect Charles Desmond will try his best to adopt you both, this will work well."

"Adopt us?" I asked, straightening and releasing Jake, though I kept one arm around him. "What do you mean?"

"That man is an old wolf who loves children. Just humor him. He adopts those he likes into his family. Once he decides you're his, that's it. The Inquisition is aware of this tendency, and he started making rumblings about running off with both of you when word first spread about your difficulties. Your courage and resilience appeal to him, and he wants to give homes to those who have struggled. And so, you'll have a new home in Seattle you can visit, and he'll drive you to the edge of madness with his posturing, but you'll like it because Charles, when he isn't being terrifying, is charming. And Wendy? I don't know of anyone who genuinely dislikes Wendy. But Wendy would benefit from your parents' insights, as would Charles."

"And since Mr. Desmond provided so many pictures, my parents will help?"

"Yes, they are aware of the debt they owe to him and have already expressed interest in assisting them in any way they can. Stabilizing their wolves, for they are both old and grow older, would aid the Inquisition and them. They have children, and one of them is still quite young."

"Bryce is old, though. Older than Mr. Desmond?" I asked.

"Bryce is ancient in Fenerec standards, yes. He is ranked as an Alpha, but he is probably, in truth, an Omega—one who happens to have been raised in an era where men were all dominant, even the most submissive of them, and he was taught to be that way from his first breath. His tendencies would have

given him stability, and the culture at the time would have given him outlets. I did ask him. He doesn't know or care if he is an Omega. He has his purpose, and being as he is allows him to fulfill that purpose. But I would place my bets on him being an Omega. Otherwise, he would have gone mad long ago. And his wolf calms Amelia's wolf."

"Her wolf is in trouble, isn't it?" I asked in a quiet voice.

"She's been struggling, but she'll be okay. Bryce will see to that. Neither of them have mated before, so I'm sure they'll dance around each other long before they get to the nipping portion of their relationship—but for now, she's stable."

I breathed a relieved sigh. "Jake thought he would be good for her."

"Jake can be quite insightful."

"Jake is standing right here," my mate muttered.

I giggled and gave his hip a pat. "Why don't I kick our therapist out and console you in the shower? We should rejoin the rest of the world and get ready to go to China. We certainly can't cut off any heads here. This room is far too nice for such bloody affairs."

Mellisa stood. "Take your time. I'll let the others know you're on the move, inform them most of the fatigue issues are resolved, and that our favorite fox requires some attention before we get to work."

"We'll try not to take too long."

She waved her hand and let herself out.

Jake graced me with a wicked grin. "And what sort of attention would my vixen like this morning?"

"A sinful shower followed with a soak. I suspect this will be our last chance for some rest and relaxation before we dive headlong into the serious work."



SOME QUALITY TIME alone with Jake resulted in a skip in my step, and to keep me from bouncing everywhere, he tossed me over his shoulder and hauled me from our room that way. Aiko stared at us with wide eyes.

“She’s a little energetic, and I don’t want her to destroy any furniture. The next stage when she gets this level of excited is to destroy furniture.”

I laughed, hanging my head at the reminder of how I’d been introduced to the pack. “I’ve gone at least a year without destroying any furniture.”

“Has it been a year? I’m not taking the risk in an establishment this fine. Where do you want me to contain her, Aiko-san?”

“We’re gathered in the conference room.” Either realizing we were a few cans short of a six pack or resigned to the situation, she guided us through the hotel.

Jake set me back on my feet once we were out of reach of the door, took hold of my hand, and did his best to keep his stride short and slow so I wouldn’t have to bounce to keep up with him. “Dare I ask if there has been more progress?”

“Various law enforcement agencies and the Inquisition in the United States are quite busy due to recent events, but the Inquisition has done a sufficient job of masking their trail. While some deaths have been deemed questionable, there has been insufficient evidence to create a suspect list.”

I connected the dots; the Inquisition had agents who were working on those cases, putting in enough substantial work to make it seem like they were doing their jobs while barring anyone else from solving any of the mysteries.

Using the same tactic Greenwich employed irritated me, but I’d learned to keep my mouth shut about the questionable things. They were always done with a reason. Sometimes, that reason was to prevent Normals from learning the truth about the world and the other species living in it.

Sometimes, that reason was to be the swift hand of justice courtrooms could not provide.

I squeezed Jake's hand and scurried along to keep up, as Aiko meant to deliver us to the conference room in a timely fashion. "Do we have any leads in China?"

"The Chinese delegation has information for us, and they're preparing for your flight to their country. They seem quite pleased with themselves, so I'm assuming they have begun making progress. I suspect that progress comes in the form of photographs for your parents to use."

I'd take progress in any shape possible. "And our odds of success?"

"We simply do not have the resources to completely eradicate Greenwich, but we should be able to eliminate the heads of their organization. Our basic look at their operations in the United States indicates that they have been thoroughly unbalanced. There are also reports coming in from London regarding unusual auras. Upon learning the source of the auras, the Inquisition there has taken steps to make certain those individuals quietly disappear. Unfortunately, they were not given the same orders as the operatives in the United States, so they have done a few live captures. They are not being kind to their captives, but they are getting information."

Well, that would complicate things. "And what will happen to them after they have been questioned?"

"Your parents will be invited to deal with them personally; they were involved with the London shooting. I have been informed that justice is sometimes a dish best served cold and personal, and this should give them closure. I was also reminded that they are not human, have been tortured for longer than any of us have been alive combined, and require a great deal of soothing to their souls."

That was something Mellisa would say, and I understood her point.

My parents had been put through worse than any hell, and the courts could not provide the kind of justice they needed. "Please express our gratitude to those in London," I replied.

Aiko smiled. "I shall do that. At first, they were going to offer that to you

and Jake-sama, but your psychologist stated you have the justice you need—they do not. Be warned: your parents have settled into a rather protective mood. They do not know how to be parents at this stage. All of their children were taken from them.”

“They’re already doing better than my ma, and I’ll make sure they know that. They have time to learn.”

I also had time to learn how to be someone’s daughter again, although I suspected I’d have a far easier time than them. I did not have the fear of loss whipping me. While I did fear loss, it simmered rather than boiled, and given time, it would cool to nothing more than a memory.

At the elevators, Aiko pressed the down button, and we headed to the conference room two floors below our room. Once inside, the group had grown, with the Chinese representatives numbering in at eight. Eric and Andrew offered polite bows, which we returned. That triggered a landslide of bowing, an amusing affair that took five minutes to resolve before everyone either stood at attention or sat for the discussions. Jake and I sat across from my parents, who fidgeted.

I recognized their restless energy for what it was: a need to hunt.

Eric stood, placed a briefcase on the table, and pulled out a thick folder. “We have been spending our time working with the Americans on gathering the relevant data to set up an appropriate timeline for your daughter’s journey overseas. While surveillance for that time period is not as robust as we prefer, we were able to acquire some photographs. One of the photographs is particularly sensitive, as the murder of your family member was caught on film. We simply hadn’t known it. Fortunately, the building with the recordings has a policy to never delete data, and they had fully digitalized their film. They had preserved the date and time stamps, allowing us to check their records upon learning the location of her murder. I am aware you have seen her body in the aftermath. But if you need photos around the time of death, well, this is the best we could do.”

Eric then said something in Chinese, and after a long moment, my mother replied in a wavering voice.

Bowing deeply, Eric offered the photograph with both hands.

Rising, my mother matched Eric's bow, accepted the picture with both hands, and said something else in Chinese.

I made the decision to avoid looking at the body of the woman who had seen me safely to the United States before sacrificing her life for mine. However, I would ask my father for one thing he might be able to grant me: the ability to see her before her death.

He had a tray of sand with him along with small jars containing many shades of pigments.

"Can you show me what she looked like before her death?" I asked.

My father offered me a smile, and he nodded. "She was very much like you and your mother, although she favored a more scandalous hair style for the time, short and proudly tipped with white. We often would style our hair and pick our clothes to best reflect us, as our features are quite similar."

After placing the photograph beside my father, my mother leaned back in her chair and sighed. "They somehow preserved her body for the journey."

"Formaldehyde," Eric replied in a grim tone. "Upon review of the photography, the culprits, and doing research, we found records of large purchases of the substance. They would have soaked her body in the chemical for transport. Did she have a strong odor?"

"Yes, she had smelled quite strange," my mother confirmed.

"It is a strong preservative, sufficient to allow them to transport her body."

"Their cruelties know no bounds," she muttered.

"That is why we will destroy them and everything they value, my love." My father pressed the fingers of his left hand to my aunt's photograph before touching the tray with his right. The sands took the form of a woman a lot like me, and she'd worn her hair in a short bob. She'd favored bright colors,

reminding me of a parrot of some sort, riotous and joyful. “We loved to call her Joy. She spread her good cheer everywhere she went. She’d wanted us to finally know the joy of having a child survive.”

My poor parents. “Well, she accomplished that in spades. Can you mark the bastards behind her death with an aura? If possible, in a color a little more distinctive than just red. Perhaps red and black?” I made a show of cracking my knuckles together. “And then you can teach me how to see these auras so I can bite the faces off any with the aura to cross my path.”

“Faces are clearly full of protein and good for the diet of a young vixen,” Jake stated, and he grinned at me. “I want to be able to see these auras, too. For a very similar reason, of course. I’ll save the faces for her and go for the throats. She can maul them however she pleases afterwards. She has a tendency to completely dismantle her prey once she gets it in her head somebody needs to die. She will do it with claws and teeth if able, but she’s not against making use of explosives.”

“Whatever gets the job done.”

Amelia, who’d occupied a corner pleasingly close to Bryce, snickered at my commentary. “There’s the Karma we know and love.”

My father allowed the sands to fall, releasing the memory of my aunt. Sliding the tray aside, he picked up the photo, and his expression darkened. “It would be my honor and pleasure. Yes, I can adjust the color of the mark to make it more distinctive. What other photos do you have for us, Eric? I’d rather do this all at once.”

“We have victims that need to be confirmed were targets of Greenwich, but we have compiled as many as we could find with similar damage to what happened in the United States—by the Normal criminals. There are some we think were made by other foxes. The marks differ.”

My mother nodded, and she bowed and held out her hands for the photographs, which Eric offered to her, also in a bow. “You have our eternal gratitude.”

“Now that we know more of what lives in our mountains, we will do our best to make certain your sanctuary is a true sanctuary, and we will restore the lost villages to serve the honorable purpose of giving you a gateway to humanity. Our government is already looking into how best to establish a rail line to make it easier to get closer to where you live. We shall make your home safe—and we shall make our home safe at the same time. We both benefit.”

I wondered how else China might try to benefit from my parents, but for the moment, I would believe their intentions.

Once I had my parents on American soil, free from surveillance, I would help make certain they didn't fall prey to even more ambitions of modern humanity despite any feelings of debt or gratitude. While we didn't have their ancestral mountains, we had mountains, and I'd help them make a home in the United States if I felt the Chinese overstepped their bounds.

For the moment, I would ignore the problem.

The enemy of my enemy was my friend, and I would not bite my new friends.

Working together, my mother and father sorted through the hundreds of photographs with ruthless efficiency. They made a pile for those they could confirm were involved with Greenwich, a pile for the photos they were not certain of, and a pile for those free from involvement with Greenwich.

They wouldn't walk free; my father marked the uninvolved with Greenwich with a dark green aura so that any who crossed paths with the brutal killers could see justice done. The souls they couldn't judge had their guilt marked in blue so they, too, could face justice for their crimes.

To streamline the process, Aiko took notes on the back of each photograph, marking them with a number and the truths my parents uncovered.

Once finished, my mother said, “This is not something we will do again, not without strong cause. It is not our way to interfere with the passions of

mortals and the lives they lead. But these? These have done much damage to us—and to others. They fall. But it is up to mortals to handle mortal affairs after this. We will not be an easy way for you to shirk your responsibilities. But this is bigger than you—and in many ways, bigger than us.”

Eric nodded. “I will make certain my superiors are aware that this is the exception rather than the rule. Will you need to rest before we travel tomorrow morning?”

“We can manage as long as we can get some sleep,” my father replied. “We can rest once in China if needed.”

“Very well. Is there anything we can do to assist you?”

“We will manage. Be still and quiet while we work, and all will be well. My love?”

My mother gathered the photographs, making certain each stack was neat and organized. “I am prepared.”

“Then let us begin.”

Something thrummed in the room, so low and quiet I questioned if I heard it at all. One by one, my mother slid a photograph to my father, who placed the fingertips of his left hand over the image. With his right hand, he traced a symbol along the glossy surface of the photograph’s paper. A red and black haze enveloped the image, sank into the surface, and disappeared.

Once the glow died away to nothing, my father passed the picture to Aiko, and my parents began the process again.

With each photograph, the thrum grew in intensity, and something in the air changed, as though some form of energy seethed nearby, watching and waiting. The familiar sensation enveloped me, and after some thought, I recognized it from my first time as a fox and I’d hidden in the loving embrace of the water.

Rather than the water holding me, it roiled somewhere far below, partnered with something else—something large and just as eager.

Sucking in a breath, I realized my parents somehow communed with the

very Earth herself, beseeching the planet for her cooperation.

And, with each trespass on human life they pursued, each photograph showing the brutal end of someone's existence, the Earth's mourning grew—as did her willingness to join my parents' cause.

Their magic worked because the Earth herself believed that Greenwich, along with the others responsible for such senseless, violent deaths, violated what it meant to be human, what it meant to help one another to survive in the great game of life.

As the sense of foreboding and grief grew, I understood why my parents established their boundaries as they had.

Their magic only worked because the Earth herself permitted it to.

By the time they finished all of the stacks, I wanted to find somewhere private to vomit, as the thrum had intensified to a bone-rattling roar.

“There. They have all been marked,” my father stated, and he made a gesture with a hand, as though waving away some errant smoke. “I offer our apologies to the sensitive. They will feel unwell for the rest of the day and likely fatigued—and it will be widespread. There were many more souls to be marked this time. The Earth has beheld their truths and found them guilty, for while she allows fate to twist and turn as it will, it was never her intention for her beloved children to do anything more than what is necessary to survive. We have all become wasteful beings unworthy of her regard. We are blessed she heard our plea and found our plight worth addressing. I would remember that were I you.”

I suspected my father jabbed at the Chinese delegation, but if they found insult or slight in his words, they showed no signs of it.

“You have done us a great boon,” Eric replied.

“And soon enough, you will do us a great boon. Your land birthed this monstrosity, and it should be your responsibility to make certain another such monstrosity is never birthed again.”

“We shall do our best.”

My father nodded, and my mother, after a few moments, did the same. She then said, “Your best is all we could ever ask of you, but next time, it will not be our children who suffer, but yours. If not for us, do it for those who walk behind you.”

“It shall be done.”

“We should rest until we must board the plane tomorrow. Eat well and in higher quantity than you are used to. The Earth exacts her tolls for the working of such magic, and we all paid a price for this in some fashion or another. And with how angry the Earth is, I would walk carefully and with good intentions in your heart. She sees and hears all, and she is not in a mood for forgiveness right now,” my mother warned.

Well, as far as beliefs went, I could get behind not pissing off the planet I lived on—and treating her with a bit more respect than I might have previously. “Will you be all right?”

“We’ll be fine, my daughter. You’ll be quite tired. I saw you listening to the song of the Earth, a gift from your father—and I suspect you heard the whispers of the deep waters as well. I will only hope that one day, you do not have to bear the burdens of our vision and the markings of such souls. May it be we have forever taken that responsibility.”

“I’d like to learn the how of it, in case it is needed.”

“The knowledge and the prices that knowledge brings shall be yours, but we will still strive to make certain you will never need to use it. You have suffered enough.”

So had they, but rather than say so, I nodded my head in agreement. I understood. In their shoes, I would have done the same. “Thank you.”

“Such a polite little thing,” my father murmured. “Go run along and have your mate take proper care of you. Soon, this journey ends, and a new one begins.”

SIXTEEN



“Eat out of my hand, little vixen.”

AIKO VIEWED my mother’s decree for rest and food to be law, and before she would allow us to get to the rest portion of our day, she made certain we had a feast capable of defeating an entire pack of Fenerec. The sushi and gyoza reduced me and my fox to drooling, and Aiko remembered Jake’s enjoyment of fried fare, making certain there was a little of everything to appease our ravenous ways.

Only when convinced we’d do our best to defeat the meal did she bow and let herself out of the room.

“We better make wagers, Jake.” I gestured at the table, which was so burdened with food I feared it might collapse. “We need rules, and we need wagers. Only strong competitive spirit is getting us through this.”

“I don’t know what your parents did in there, but I am ready to eat several horses. Are you sure you can defeat me, my little vixen?” With a smirk, he picked up a piece of sushi. When he noticed me licking my lips, he brought the piece closer. “Do you want this?”

According to my fox, my mate could live without a finger or two. I reined her in, but I nodded. “I bite.”

Laughing, he brought the piece over. “Eat out of my hand, little vixen. Only then can you have the sushi.”

Aware we could make quite the mess, I took care accepting the treat from

him. “Competitive spirit, not teasing with hand feeding, Jake.”

“But I like feeding you.”

“My parents have gotten the entire planet to heel right now, Jake. If they say eat, we are eating. Competitively until not a single bite is left over. Then we are going to go to that big bed, curling up together, and sleeping off our act of gluttony. Then we finally get to be put to work like the good, highly trained work dogs we are.”

Jake dared to laugh at me. “All right. But while we eat, I want to hear your thoughts about Greenwich and where we currently stand. I think I’m starting to figure out the whole story here, but I’m still struggling in places. Like that Jacob kid. How does he fit into this whole thing? How long has Greenwich been after you?”

“Number of full plates?”

“That sounds good.” Jake grabbed one of the plates, loaded it up with sushi and gyoza, filled one of the numerous dipping cups with soy sauce, and handed it over. He then made a plate for himself, sticking to the tempuras and other fried delicacies waiting for his attention. “We’ll take turns. You eat your plate first while I talk, and then you’ll talk while I eat my plate. I’m sure you’ll enjoy correcting me.”

I would, and pleased with the arrangement, I focused on my prey, the elusive gyoza and its sushi sidekick. “Can I make corrections as you’re talking?”

“Absolutely. What I learn may change what I say later.”

I dipped my gyoza in the soy sauce and appreciated how it remained fresh despite having been brought to the room. I suspected a fire witch had something to do with the perfect state of my dinner. The first bite roused my hunger, and my stomach demanded it be filled.

I obeyed.

“Your parents are the core of our problems with Greenwich, although Greenwich would have ultimately become our problem regardless of your

status as their most beautiful and charming daughter.”

I snorted at his commentary, but I waved my hand for him to continue.

“In an effort to gain control over the United States weapon arsenals, of various types including nuclear, they began cultivating traitors in the central government. To assist their efforts, they planted individuals in many branches of law enforcement and the military. The military plants are the dangerous ones; they had access to the missile codes and arming systems. What we don’t know is if they had access to the guidance systems. I haven’t been able to ask, as I wasn’t certain who to ask—or if I should ask.”

I gulped down another bite of gyoza and said, “All things considered, I think it’s a good thing you didn’t bring that up. I’d rather not be in line for a severe questioning.”

“So far, so good?”

“We’re on the same page,” I confirmed before picking up a piece of sushi and dipping it in my soy sauce. Our adventure to Japan had taught me that they viewed sushi differently from what we were used to in the United States. Instead of large pieces requiring several bites, I was expected to pop the entire piece into my mouth. At most, two bites were permitted.

Most people could handle eating a piece of sushi in one bite, and I’d adopted their way of handling it. I foresaw choking when we returned to the United States, as I’d inevitably attempt to eat an entire piece in one go.

“I’m still not clear on how your ma became involved. At some point, she became associated with Greenwich, attempting to kill you. But you entered the care of the Johnsons. Your pa was the angel of the pairing, doing what he could for you without understanding you aren’t human.”

Right. Unlike Jake, who was a human bonded with a wolf spirit, there was nothing human about me. I was a fox who could take on the shape of a human. “It could be the air clan they discussed; she may have become involved knowing my species. Greenwich had followed me to the United States, murdering my first adoptive parents. But my bet would be this air clan

had become involved, interfered, and kept me out of Greenwich's hands."

"That's my thought, too. After London, I hadn't thought the Johnsons would become involved with you again, although that seemed... strange."

"Any accusations of abuse would have brought the CARD case back to the forefront, resulting in the confirmation she'd killed her son. At that point, she knew the jig was up. She had to get rid of my pa, because once the jig was up, he would talk. The instant he had confirmation she'd killed their son, the game would have been over," I whispered.

I snatched another piece of sushi and chomped on it, grateful we lacked an audience to witness my abandonment of good manners.

"That's what I thought, but my knowledge of CARD is not nearly as substantial as yours." Jake picked up a piece of his tempura, and like me, he took his frustration out on his food. "Let's back up to the Greenwich case, where you were accidentally kidnapped along with the baby. That is one thing everyone agrees on; they had limited opportunities, and the only way they could get the baby was to also take you. Considering where the kidnapping happened, they likely hoped you were prejudiced, although you're anything but. I suspect standard Greenwich operatives would have no idea your appearance indicated a link to your parents, but I am willing to bet your picture quickly made the rounds to someone who would recognize you."

"Thus starting the snowball. That matches my opinions on that."

"Because you're brave, cunning, and quite the skilled little vixen, you managed to escape with the baby until the Inquisition could retrieve you. That was quite the rodeo, as we needed to make sure we only had Inquisition operatives for the recovery."

"That big dog was a Fenerec, then."

"Correct. And because of your ties with me, the circumstances of the kidnapping, and the Inquisition having flagged you as a possible witch, they made certain to have the appropriate personnel on hand in case your witchcraft awoke. But it turns out you have something a little more than basic

witchcraft.”

“No kidding.”

“This is where I’m going to take a few sharp turns, putting together what I’ve been thinking about versus what we witnessed. Before we came to Japan, Mellisa had been talking to me in therapy about the changes in my behavior.”

“Thus, the whole Omega thing.”

“Right. She isolated several points in my FBI history where my behavior changed. Unbeknownst to me, one of our bosses had flagged us as a potential pairing; I had fixated on you, and I had a tendency to react poorly when something happened to you. I’ll admit, my wolf was invested the instant he met you, and he wanted to surrender and follow you around like a puppy from the start. What got us flagged was my abandonment of my overly aloof ways with previous partners. Which, apparently, is a symptom of a submissive who has to hide being submissive. The aloofness is our bad attempt at trying to keep a distance without putting our tails between our legs and pissing out of fright. We cover it trying to act bold. In reality, we’re big softies who want nothing more than a hug.”

I read between the lines: my mate needed extra cuddles after we ate dinner. “I’ll make sure you’re given proper attention after we eat.”

He chuckled. “She thinks you started working on me in earnest after about a year into our partnership; that was when you started to trust me. I think, over that year, my wolf and I became what was needed to support you. Whatever makes you you then started working on me to make sure I stuck around. Fenerec die from one of three ways, typically: the plague, bodily harm, or running wild and being killed. Of the three ways, I was at higher risk of running wild than most. Before your intervention, Mellisa estimates I would have run wild by the time I turned a hundred due to trying to be dominant when I’m really simply not. She is concerned it might have been sooner, possibly by the time I turned fifty. She found indications in my file

about probable symptoms of being unbalanced. At that stage, not a risk to anyone, but I had the behavioral oddities displayed in those who are at higher risk of running wild.”

I winced. “And as I hadn’t really understood I was a fox then, it would have been the magic that makes me sink like a stone in the water.”

“The entirety of the Earth loves you, although not nearly as much as I do.”

I laughed at that, shook my head at the absurdity of his statement, and rather than question him, I ate more of my food. “That leads to my transfer to CARD.”

“I did not handle your transfer to CARD well. Mellisa showed me parts of my file, and she explained my behaviors—mated without being actually mated, essentially. Which tracks, because until recently, you’ve had a hell of a time picking up our mating markers. Whatever makes you you hides that—and I suspect it’s due to your parents.”

I stopped eating to regard him with wide eyes. “What do you mean?”

“Your parents knew they had one child who possibly survived. They are old, and they are powerful. They would have wanted you to live, and sometimes, the easiest way to hide someone is to mask their presence. Considering how they can influence auras, I suspect their magic has been working on you the whole time, safeguarding you. I think your brand of the same magic is starting to overpower what they can do at a distance, resulting in hidden things, like our mating bond, being revealed.”

I wrinkled my nose, as the lack of scent markers had caused us so many problems. “And if that is the case, I can’t even get angry at them over it. It’s a sound theory.”

“It did create a lot of problems for us. And a lot of the blame goes to me, although Mellisa is trying to convince me that until I’d fully transitioned from submissive to Omega there was truly nothing I could do to fight it.”

Being a victim sucked, and when the victimizers were parents, the level

of suckage grew to epic proportions. We'd both weathered that storm, albeit in different ways. "You couldn't fight them because of your status as submissive."

He nodded. "I wanted to, but my wolf kept balking, and it went beyond just being upset."

"Terror." I understood terror. I also understood how Jake's parents might not recognize the truth about their submissive son. "That would be when my magic worked in earnest."

"You would have been expending a lot of calories doing it, which explains your dramatic weight loss during our separation. You were undereating, but nothing in anything we investigated indicated you were undereating to the extent of losing all of your muscle mass like you had. That should have taken substantially longer."

Huh. That hadn't occurred to me. "And the London shooting?"

"In Mellisa's opinion, that would have been the pivotal moment for your magic to really start working on me. Your true nature woke up, and your true nature identified me as your mate. Our noses and general abilities couldn't pick up on it, but your fox did."

I could believe that with little effort, and to buy myself some time to think about it, I ate another gyoza.

"That takes us to our separation."

I wrinkled my nose, as while we'd discussed it more than a few times in the past, with Mellisa serving as a referee, I abhorred the memories. "Do you think the Hemshaw case is linked to Greenwich?"

"I don't know. They'll be looking into it, but due to the nature of the case, it could go either way. I don't think so, but a lot of what we thought proved to be wrong. Hell, the Inquisition initially thought someone was trying to expose the Fenerec when we were working on Jacob's case. We've since determined our preconceived notions cost us a lot of opportunities to uncover Greenwich operatives right under our noses."

“Like my team.”

“There was nothing you could have done about that, Karma. It was two against three, and the only potential ally in that mess had been deliberately soured against you by the Greenwich operatives. And since we hadn’t even known Greenwich had infiltrated the FBI, it wasn’t a mountain you could climb. I will make sure Mellisa talks you through it, because you’re going to need a lot of therapy before you return to CARD, fix what Greenwich broke, and decide where we’re going from there. If you want to save kids, we’ll save kids—and we’ll do so in a friendly environment. The cards were all stacked against you. And no, I will refuse any team with my parents on it. Mellisa has told me more times than I care to count that my parents are going to have to learn how to be parents again, and that I’m best off at a healthy distance.”

“As long as they change for the better, especially for the other submissives in their pack,” I muttered.

“Fortunately for the other submissives in the pack, they are treated much closer to how they need to be treated. I just wasn’t because my mother believes she couldn’t possibly have anything other than a dominant son.”

“Still, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I truly fucked up in more ways than I care to think about, but a lot of my behaviors were cultivated through abuse. The only way I fix that is changing me, well, normally. In our case, you changed me. I would have completely broken had I remained a submissive. But before I completely shattered, your magic fixed the core problem.”

“I liked you just as you were before, Jake.”

“I’m still the same person, Karma. My wolf just isn’t being tormented all the time trying to be something he’s not. It was a gradual change, but you’re why I wasn’t crushed beneath the weight of it all.”

I added the discussion as something else to bring up to Mellisa to work on after we finished dealing with Greenwich. “You seem less cuddly.”

“You just want more attention,” he countered.

Grinning, I went for another piece of sushi, saluted him with it, and popped it into my mouth.

“That takes us to our independent work. Greenwich went underground, probably trying to track you down, but since you left the circles where their operatives could locate you, you essentially disappeared on them. Your file was locked in the FBI, so I’m betting the Greenwich operatives lost access. My file was likewise locked down. Not even my parents have access to it at the moment.”

“Will your parents be changing positions in the FBI?”

I foresaw a great deal of complexity if either of his parents were involved with CARD.

“I’ll be making the request that they focus on violent crimes while we work in CARD. The overlap should be minimal, and my mother can easily redirect CARD-related things to someone else’s work pile. I won’t enjoy the fight involved to make it happen, but I’ll see to it. The last thing I need is a heart attack from worrying about my lovely vixen of a wife eating my mother’s face because of territory disputes. I suspect that is already in the works, however. Mellisa wouldn’t put you in a work environment with my mother unless you are ready for it.”

“Knowing her, she’s going to do it just to make sure we’re kept on our toes,” I muttered.

“With the new intel, I suspect Greenwich was searching for you, probably as a live capture. After the London shooting, you would have established yourself as your parents’ daughter, and if they had you alive, they would be able to control your parents. Seeing what they can do, Greenwich might not even need weapon codes to do a lot of damage. If they know about their ability to mark souls as they do, they’d be able to mark assassination targets with ease—and eliminate them. And if they have figured out the Inquisition exists, then we’d all run high risk of exposure. I’m not sure our witches are strong enough to take on your parents.”

“My parents are terrifying when provoked.” I polished off my plate and set it on the table. “Your turn to eat while I do most of the talking, unless you have something to add?”

“That’s the core of it. What are your thoughts?”

While Jake attacked the food on his plate, I took a few minutes to gather my thoughts. “I think we have a few key problems on our hands. Greenwich’s infiltration of the military and American branches of government and law enforcement is certainly worrisome. If the Inquisition wasn’t so good at sniffing out who is a Normal and who isn’t, they might have managed to infiltrate the Inquisition. They haven’t, have they?”

“No, they haven’t,” he confirmed. “The Inquisition only brings in Normals once they’ve been heavily vetted—or they’re the mate or child of a witch or wolf. And some mates haven’t been inducted because they aren’t aware their spouse is more than meets the eye. That’s rare, though.”

I nodded. “What we need to identify is when my ma allied herself with Greenwich. I don’t think it would have been before London; everything was normal as far as I could tell. And since my ma hadn’t panicked about my affinity with foxes, I think this air fox clan are the ones who ultimately buried their son’s death and made sure I had a place.”

“And that means this fox clan would have been monitoring you and the situation.”

“That leaves us with the pack of papers that my ma was supposed to have. Have you heard anything about the safe deposit box?”

“Unfortunately not. If they found any documents, they haven’t told me about them yet.”

“So, that’s where I think we need to truly start. What documents had been brought over from China? Why did my ma hide them from me?” I hadn’t put much thought into it, especially as I had no reason to think there might be someone who understood my physical problems. “I’m going to be livid if it’s a basic guide on how to properly be a fox, Jake. Including life span, not

actually sharing traits with cuttlefish, and important details like the length of pregnancy and so on.”

My mate snickered, devoured another piece of his tempura, and grinned at me. “I’m not sure if I’m thrilled or terrified of multi-year pregnancies with entire litters.” His expression sobered, and he added, “I’m also worried about how we’ll both handle the loss of any of the children. Your parents seem to always lose at least one.”

“You’ll be providing robust new genetics, so hopefully the additional diversity will prevent health problems.” I winced as the reality of the situation once again crashed down on my head and shoulders. “We’re going to be blubbering messes even if we end up with an entire flock of ten and we lose even one.”

“That’s why you’ll do well in CARD, Karma—that’s why you were always a good fit for CARD. You will absolutely fight the odds to save a kid, and you really aren’t the kind to take not trying to solve the case well.”

“I wonder how the CARD team handled the Johnson case—likely knowing my ma did it without finding the proof.”

“They’re still alive, well, and working in CARD, although they’re senior members now. But, I suspect they had one good reason to keep from flinging around accusations: you. They would have seen that they had a healthy, happy young child in their custody. Without proof, they would have risked turning your life upside down even more. And despite what your ma did, I do genuinely believe that your ma tried her best, in her twisted way. That doesn’t make what she did right, but she did try. In the end, she went back to her old ways and took your pa out with her when she went, but she did her job as a mother.”

“At only the basic level.”

“Karma, you’re a caring, driven, and successful woman. Your ma played her part in that. So did your pa. Was she a good or perfect mother? No, she really wasn’t. But she did more than just her job with you. In some ways, she

made up for the sin of killing her son. That doesn't make what she did right, but you didn't become an FBI agent because she wanted you to. You became an FBI agent because you believed in the cause—and you had seen how a family with a lost child suffered. That was mostly your pa, but your ma played her act well. The more I think about it, the more I don't believe Greenwich had any involvement in your upbringing.”

“Why?”

“You would never willfully endanger a child. That goes against how Greenwich operates. The instant they asked that of you, you would have begun your quest to burn them to the ground like we are working on doing now.”

That I could believe. “So, we have this air fox clan because the fire foxes vanished into legend and myth. Is that where I was as a child? It could be. Maybe they were teaching me how to be a fox the whole time, and then they taught my ma how to prevent me from becoming a fox until later? My ma would have noticed if her infant refused to grow over a period of years, Jake.”

“And she would have likely killed you like she killed her son.”

I nodded.

“It's a sound theory. Perhaps your aunt somehow got word to this air fox clan, who tracked down your new parents to keep an eye on the situation? Then they were murdered, and they claimed you before Greenwich could kill you? At that stage, Greenwich would have finished the job they had started.”

Once again, I nodded. “I only became valuable when it became clear I was like my parents.”

“Right. Your survival would have likely led them to believe you had their trait of apparent immortality. I did not appreciate how long it took for you to recover after the London shooting. My wolf about went psycho because we couldn't defend you properly because of the gunshot wounds.” He ate another piece of his tempura, and once finished, he raised a brow at me. “Are

you convinced we're not dead yet?"

I snagged a piece of sushi, chittered a warning at him, and devoured it. "You are an asshole, Jake Thomas!"

"I do miss those loving exclamations of my status as the ultimate asshole. Are you going to start calling me Agent Asshole?"

"I just might, especially if we do go back to CARD. Calling you an asshole is stress relieving, I do have to admit."

"When you first started calling me an asshole, I'll admit, I was concerned. Then I used my nose and realized you actually liked me, and as you never show affection to partners, especially male partners, I began interpreting that as you expressing your undying love for me."

"That's not being an asshole, Jake. That's being delusional."

"My delusions worked out just fine, thank you."

Much to my irritation, it had. "Generally, I'm in agreement with you, but I think we need to take a closer look at Jacob's case. If the autopsy reports came back as conclusively a natural predatory attack, like what foxes like me can do, why did this air fox clan, if it was them, become involved?"

"They are probably allies who have been hunting Greenwich in the United States, framing Greenwich for the killings. Those deaths were all readily verifiable as manmade, with metal tools. A lazy investigator might look at similar cases, find the Greenwich murders, and match the methods. In reality, they killed their prey, probably to give Jacob a chance to escape his situation—a situation Jacob didn't know he was in. All they would have had to do to send Jacob absolutely fleeing across the country is chitter. The first time you came out to play as your fox, my wolf had a severe case of unnerved. Once we clued in you were you, he went from wary to overjoyed, but Jacob wouldn't have had that reassurance, not as a puppy. He would have felt the pressure of a fox and fled without knowing why."

Huh. That better matched what we knew of Jacob's flight. "And what we did discover about the case through those photographs matches what we

know of Greenwich, and they may have backed off Jacob because of the FBI's involvement—and with agents who weren't involved with their operation.”

“Right. They're smart enough to know when it's time to back off. The pieces all fit. His relative's involvement with Greenwich needs to be investigated, but that's more of a wrap up than an immediate need. We'll be assembling the pieces of Greenwich's history after their fall rather than leading to their fall. That's fine, as long as the bastards fall.”

On that, we were agreed. “And they will. If I have to pick up every petty black-market op to hit the system to make certain they're all gone, I will.”

“Petty? Karma, have you not been paying attention to how much we're paid when we do dirty work?”

I huffed, crossed my arms, and turned my head, refusing to look him in the eyes. “I'm not giving up my side gig.”

“Nobody is asking you to, Karma. If anything, working to reorganize CARD while picking up black market work meant to clean up the FBI is going to be lucrative for both of us. But they're not petty. We're going to be able to buy a nice house in the mountains in cash without blinking about it. Also, there are nice mountains not far from Seattle. I'm liking the idea of moving out west more and more—and having met your parents, mountains are going to be a requirement.”

“But I'm afraid of heights, Jake,” I whined.

“Want to bet air foxes can fly and they took you on a few flights as an infant?” Jake snickered. “And thus you developed a hefty fear of heights from a very young age. If your parents can do what they can, I definitely believe in a fox that can fly.”

While I refused to look at him, I did consider his statement. Shivering, I said, “That has enough plausibility to be disturbing, because I can't remember any incidents from my childhood that would have made me afraid of heights.”

“Explain that whole willingness to climb trees thing, though. You’re damned good at tree climbing.”

“I doubt this air fox clan was chucking an infant into trees and expecting anything other than bouncing and probable death.”

“But what if you were a baby fox and could climb trees? Perhaps they were dumping you in the tops of trees and expecting you to climb down on your own.”

“Jake Thomas, you are such an asshole.”

He laughed at me. “It’s a good theory.”

“However good it is, let’s go with the flying fox theory. That one, at least, makes sense.”

“Sounds good to me. What else are you missing?”

“That’s a very, very good question, Jake. Let’s hope we don’t find out until after the dust has settled.”

SEVENTEEN



My fox wanted blood.

THE CHINESE WANTED to set a trap using me to do it while witches disguised my parents. I wore my mother's clothes, and as we didn't sound the same nor did I speak the languages she did, my job was to remain quiet. Jake, disguised to resemble my father, had the same orders.

As we weren't certain we could see the auras, we would prance around through numerous Chinese airports while members of the Chinese Inquisition made use of a few marked targets to bring Greenwich out to us.

They hoped the heavy surveillance in the airports would result in us being stalked rather than openly attacked, as Greenwich worked to keep its presence within the Chinese government a secret. I loved the duplicity of the situation.

We hunted them as they had hunted us, and the plan had good odds of working. As we masqueraded as my parents, we would be targeted for capture rather than death, or so the Inquisition believed. With my parents on guard, who wore the same style of clothes as the other delegates and had taken on a more stereotypical Chinese appearance, I thought we had good odds of something going right. We might learn something, we might make a live capture or two of our own, or we might even lure out the heart of the matter. We might fail completely, but if we did, we still came out with something of use: they weren't monitoring the Chinese government as

closely as some believed.

Our first stop was in Shanghai, where we prowled around the airport and pretended like we'd never seen a terminal in our lives. We played at making common airport blunders, heading for the wrong gate to our next destination, which would be Hong Kong. When we did talk, we did so in low voices in the noisiest sections of the airport to help prevent anyone from realizing we weren't my parents.

Every now and then, I spotted someone from the Inquisition prowling around. While I couldn't distinguish faces well, I'd been an FBI agent long enough to recognize the way they moved as someone on guard, watching for trouble. I'd need to remind the Chinese they had to do better about disguising their activities, although I appreciated being able to spot those seeking our adversary.

The flight from Shanghai left without incident, and we reached Hong Kong after a bout of rough air, which had resulted in my mate bonking his head. Had he been a regular human, I might have considered dragging him off to the hospital, but I'd learned my wolf would shake off the discomforts of a concussion in record time. Unlike him, I'd managed to escape injury, as my tendency to white-knuckle through flights had kept me from being bounced around as much.

He'd even had his seatbelt on, although he'd been contorting in his effort to reach for his bag.

In Hong Kong, upon reaching our gate for our next destination, the city of Beihai, I learned I could spot those my parents had marked. A black and red, twisting aura surrounding the woman, American born and raised judging from her attire and appearance. She spotted us, and with a predatory grin, she came our way.

My fox wanted blood.

According to my nose, Jake held on to his fury by the thinnest of threads.

As my mother never smiled upon meeting someone, I regarded the

woman with as much cool disdain as I could muster, hoping it would fool my target.

“You’re absolutely beautiful,” the woman gushed, and she bounced to a halt in front of us.

According to her appearance, she couldn’t have been any older than thirty, although I knew better than to trust my eyes. Makeup, good skin care, and genetics could allow even a sixty-year-old to pass off as someone younger. My nose informed me I dealt with a Normal, so I assumed she used the oldest trick in the book to put us at ease.

Makeup could work almost as well as magic at disguising someone.

As I had been briefed to do, I issued a short little bow, one that could be perceived as gratitude for the compliment. If I needed to speak, I’d have to do my best to pitch my voice and way of speaking to match my mother, something I worried would betray us all.

“Can I take a picture with you?”

I pegged her as seeking out information, and as I was to play the role of someone just learning technology, I retrieved the small, low-end phone I’d been given, a prop to make it appear as though my mother struggled to join the modern world. I nodded, and after unlocking the device, I held it out, hoping my expression was inquisitive.

“I can take one for you, too,” she chirped.

Good. My parents would enjoy making use of the photo to find out my target’s secrets. As Jake and I weren’t supposed to know how cameras and photos worked, we fumbled about, and the woman behaved as though she expected such things, as she helped us get into position before taking selfies with her phone and then with mine.

Once done, I took care to handle the device with cloth rather than skin, as it would be processed for her fingerprints along with any other evidence we might be able to get from the device.

After returning my phone, she scampered off.

I checked over my shoulder to determine the selfie had likely caught the boarding gate so that her accomplices might track us down at our next stop. As we'd been briefed to do, I shuffled off to the bathroom, where an Inquisition member would meet me.

My nose identified her as a witch, and we took stalls beside each other. Unlike in the United States, the stalls in the airport bathrooms barely had space to slip anything beneath, which offered a great deal more privacy but complicated what I needed to do.

She passed a plastic bag and a pair of gloves through the gap, and I eased on the gloves, removed the SIM chip, and put the phone into the bag before passing it back. She gave me an identical phone, and I reinstalled the chip before removing the gloves and returning them to her.

Then I handled the expected business, grateful I'd kept hydrated so I could pull the ruse off. If I ran into another Greenwich operative, I'd repeat the same process with a new Inquisitor, gathering as much intel as we could on them while they attempted to do the same to us.

Jake waited for me outside of the men's room, and he returned to my side the instant I emerged. Upon reaching our gate, he waited for an announcement to lean to me and say, "They're attempting to plant someone on our flight. They're at ticketing now. They're going to adjust seating so we're at the back of the plane and they're at the front."

I nodded. Putting us in the back would give the Chinese Inquisition plenty of time to observe at the gate, monitoring for anyone with the aura—or anyone without the aura who behaved the same way as the exposed Greenwich operatives. We'd have an uncomfortable flight, but we'd arrive in Beihai well positioned to deal with any surprises once on the ground.

The real trouble would begin on the final leg of our journey, which would take us to Xigazê Peace Airport. Most flew to Nepal when heading to Mount Everest, but my parents had made it clear that they had their sanctuary on the Tibetan side of the mountain chain and that the actual entry to their domain

lurked within smaller mountains, with a cave and tunnel system taking them into the heart of the world.

They did not challenge Mount Everest, at least not while human. They made a point of venturing up every now and then to make certain the souls of the lost climbers would find peace rather than haunt them for any longer than necessary.

We would be taking a smaller plane into Xigazê, and I expected I would need a great deal of tender, loving care to survive the trip. We would be taking the journey mostly alone, with a pair of Fenerec pilots experienced with flying into the region and a few Inquisitors experienced with survival if something went amiss. A commercial flight would take more Inquisitors and some Chinese operatives along with an air witch who would take up my parents' shape.

My parents would be on a third flight along with Mellisa, Amelia, Bryan, and an entire team.

The airport would have a busy day, although we were making a point of staggering our departures to give any Greenwich operatives on the ground a false sense of security.

My parents' flight would be diverted due to plane trouble, although their plane would be in perfect working order when they landed.

The Chinese thought they could get away with sliding in one private flight and diverting one to get us all there in a timely fashion without drawing suspicion.

Trouble followed us to Beihai as expected, and they maintained their methodology, following us to our next gate to determine which flight we would be taking next. Once the Greenwich operative, possessing a red aura, left to buy a ticket, Jake and I began the next phase of our plan.

We went to the bathroom, swapped places and clothes with those taking the commercial flight, and had witches change our appearance once again, disguising us as American tourists headed for an adventure deep within Tibet.

Once outside of the bathroom, three more Greenwich operatives made an appearance, and an old man carried the black and red aura of someone directly involved with my aunt's death. Rather than demand immediate vengeance, my fox observed, memorizing the man's features. She hunted, but it pleased me she understood she couldn't hunt in the airport where so many witnesses might become involved.

As planned, the bastards involved with Greenwich focused on the two operatives disguised as my parents, leaving us to slip away to catch our real flight to Xigazê.

If all went to plan, we would arrive first.

Boarding went without incident, and as soon as the pilots were ready, we were given clearance to takeoff.

While the plane was small and cramped, it boasted a large range, although we would land once to refuel at an Inquisition airbase before making the final leg of our trip into Tibet. Once in the air, the pilot turned on the private comm and said, "Rough air is a way of life in Tibet, but it's nothing we can't handle. The airport we're going in is rated for Airbuses, so we'll be more than fine on that front. It's not like traveling into Lukla, although it can still be a bit rough."

According to his accent, we were being flown by an American from New England, although I eliminated Boston as his origin. "You're American!"

"China called in a few favors, so you have an American flight team for this, although we've both worked the Tibet circuit for years. We're getting long in the tooth, and we've been flying since planes were invented. Tibet is a good challenge. I'm Logan, and my co-pilot is Noah. We're part of a pack in Maine. The rest of the team is a mix of Chinese and American, although everyone speaks English."

"Small miracles," Jake stated in an amused tone. "How are we doing on intel?"

"Pretty good. We got the fingerprints lifted off your mate's phone, and

we're already churning through the databases to see what we can dig up. As soon as the flights to Xigazê are all in the air, the Chinese will start making simultaneous arrests. Communication lines and cell towers will be shut down to Xigazê except for authorized numbers to prevent our ruse from being discovered. Flight internet connections will also be shut down, with the flight crews disabling them as technical difficulties shortly after takeoff to prevent anyone from notifying our targets. Once we are in Xigazê, you will be authorized to use as much force as you'd like. I am carrying your firearms, and you'll be given them, along with ammunition, upon landing. If we can get one alive, that would be ideal, but our orders are clear; we're to eliminate anyone with the appropriate auras unless an easy and safe live capture is possible." Logan made a noise in his throat.

"That doesn't sound promising." Jake chuckled. "When I make that sound, it's because I know I'm about to say something my wife isn't going to like."

I snickered at that. "He's not wrong. What's wrong, Logan?"

"There is debate about manufacturing a terrorism event to account for the number of deaths. We have a few Inquisition forces already located in Xigazê, and there are a lot of people with the auras in the airport loitering—far more than would normally be in that airport. The city itself has a high number of those involved, too."

"How many people are we talking about?" I asked, a chill sweeping through me.

"They're estimating at least a hundred and fifty in the airport, and another three to five hundred in the city. The ones in the city seem to be making preparations to go to the airport, likely to intercept your parents. The number of bodies indicates live capture or mass martyrdom."

Fucking martyrs. Nothing terrified FBI agents more than the idea of dealing with a martyr, who would happily suicide to take out as many with them when they went. In my career, I'd run into a few martyrs. They'd

created the worst tragedies outside of what was experienced in CARD.

Martyrs enjoyed sacrificing children on the altar of their ambitions.

“What about the civilians?”

“The Chinese Inquisition will be doing their best to remove anyone who has not been marked. They will be monitored and taken into custody, questioned, and if they are found to be innocent of connections to Greenwich, they’ll be released,” one of the Chinese men on board stated. “Call me Maurice. I will be your interpreter for the journey, as I can speak numerous Tibetic languages, Cantonese, Mandarin, English, French, and a few others we’re unlikely to encounter. My experience with the Tibetic languages earned me a spot on this trip, however. I can speak twenty of the forms fluently, and I can understand most of the others, as they share similar roots. We will most likely encounter Standard Tibetan and Sherpa, although upon hearing the assignment, I’ve brushed up on a few of the other dialects. Standard Tibetan is typically sufficient to be understood, as many of the linguistic groupings are closely related.”

“Sherpa? You mean like the guides that do the Mount Everest base camp stuff?” I asked.

“Yes, them. Sherpa is a tricky language; it’s tonal in nature; how you pitch the words changes the meaning of the words, and it’s often non-comparable to how English is spoken. English isn’t a tonal language, although we do use tone to indicate moods. In Sherpa, tone is used to change the meaning of words. This is where your name becomes particularly interesting, Karma. In some forms of Tibetan, Dawa means moon. In Sherpa, it means Monday.”

I blinked. “Like the day of the week?”

“Indeed. Your name is a play on words; you were shipped to the United States on a Monday, and we believe the day of the week plays a significant part in your general survival. When your name was presented to me, I brainstormed the various meanings of your name, finding that Dawa might

not have the obvious meaning of moon.”

Huh. In more than a few ways, I regretted that my aunt had not survived through sending me to the United States. “How clever.”

Maurice sighed, drawing my attention to him. “Your aunt was a very clever woman, swift and cunning. It is quite the tragedy she had been forced to pay for your life with hers.”

“Do you know why she did it?”

Once again, the translator sighed. “I have a solid guess. She once had a companion. I don’t know if he was viewed as a spouse or a mate or simply the closest of friends, but while they could not have children together, their love was as deep as the ocean. Perhaps due to their inability to procreate, Greenwich executed him—likely to keep your family in line. A warning of what would happen to other pairings failing to procreate.”

Just when I thought my rage over Greenwich couldn’t be further intensified, someone found a way to illuminate yet another one of their sins. “She was grieving.”

“The few times I have gotten to speak with your parents in private, although not as much as I would like, yes, they implied that is the case. They are willing to breed with whomever is necessary—an act solely to keep their species alive. But they form bonds much like Fenerec do, and those run deep. From what your mother told me, your aunt would never recover from the loss of her partner, who had been with her for thousands upon thousands of years. It was a wound that would never heal. She spent her death wisely.”

“They hadn’t mentioned that part,” I admitted.

“Your parents were not sure how many burdens you could handle, so they did not want to give you the full tragedy.”

“It compounds the interest owed, that’s for sure.” At my fox’s request, I issued an irritated chitter. “And the airport will be cleared of as many innocents as possible?”

Logan chuckled. “This is correct. We have an earth witch present, and

none of the operatives have brought any weapons with them whatsoever. They have come with very little, which is concerning. I see foxes have as much drive to bring some wholesome violence to the worthy as Fenerec do.”

“They’ve earned it.”

“That they have,” the pilot agreed. “This is where we may change our plans a little. With zero evidence of them seeking violence, we want to get a feel for what they are at the airport for. You are our best card to play for this. We want to see what they do should you show up. It could go one of three ways that we’ve estimated so far.”

Ah, I just loved when plans went sideways as they often tended to do. “We’re changing the plan now?”

“I like to think of it as refining it somewhat.” There was a brief pause as the pilot changed channels, communicating with someone in Chinese. He then said, “Their behavior is odd, as are the reports we’re getting from some of the sensitive witches. Fenerec are also reporting pure joy and delight upon finding you when you were disguised as your parents. It’s to the point of worship.”

“Yet they killed my aunt and tried to kill me?”

“We have some theories about that,” Maurice stated in a rather confident tone, which concerned me. “The group is, as your parents informed us, founded on the whole concept of greed. Immortal life is highly valued by them. You have dodged death despite lengthy odds. You survived being heavily mistreated as an infant through no fault of your mother. You survived the journey from the heart of Mount Everest all the way across China to catch your flight to the United States. You survived. You are likely proof of your parents’ immortality having successfully been passed down. This would fall in line with their belief system. In their eyes, your parents may very well be gods, and you would be the proof their divine essence can be inherited.”

The last thing I needed was religious fanaticism complicating matters for us. “What is the end goal?”

“With luck, in their fanaticism, they will sacrifice the head of their organization for the heart of their belief system, which happens to be your family.”

Maurice’s suggestion shocked me and my fox, and Jake captured my hand, giving it a squeeze.

When I refused to speak, my mate said, “You’re hoping to use their beliefs against them?”

“The woman who had approached you for the photographs was truly and genuinely overjoyed to meet you, believing you were your parents. This joy was clearly palpable to our witches and other Fenerec,” Maurice replied. “I have a theory on why that might be as well. On the surface, it makes no sense. Why try to kill you if they worship you? However, what if they weren’t trying to kill you but rather expose your divinity from birth? Fanaticism is a brutal beast, but if their belief system involves them chasing down the idea of immortality, then attempting to kill you as an infant makes sense. For you to survive what you did as an infant would be confirmation of immortality to them. Then for you to survive the London shooting as well?”

Maurice’s theory made a sickening amount of sense. “Their beliefs would be reinforced, resulting in more worship directed at my parents; they did pass their supposed divinity on to a child. Me.”

“And if they want their power to be divine-granted, then they need gods and goddesses backing them. They might not even realize how much true power your parents wield.”

Sickened at the thought of how far people would go for misguided religious beliefs, I said, “And they wouldn’t try to kill my parents because they have all the confirmation of immortality they need through spoken word.”

“That’s correct. I don’t know if your parents have come to this conclusion or not yet, but if that is part of their belief system, we might be able to turn our enemies into our allies. It really depends. They could also form a mob,

but let's face it, you shift fast and well, and no human has any chance of defeating you even mobbed together. The Fenerec don't shift as fast as you do, but I expect with all their focus on you, they'll have enough time to transform before things escalate."

Logan cleared his throat. "We're prepared for bloodshed. The security systems at Xigazê will be wiped as needed to cover the exposure of the Inquisition. We'll concoct a story about a terrorism event using hallucinogens should any Normals escape from the airport. The Chinese have their way of making these sorts of problems disappear quietly."

That I could readily believe. "Your thoughts, Noah?"

The co-pilot snorted. "I hate religious fanatics. I fought during World War II. I still remember. To me, your family has faced the same horrors as those forced into concentration camps, but over a longer period of time. Worse, while they were not put through, perhaps, the same physical abuses, I suspect they were ultimately driven to have children to protect their dwindling family. Reading between the lines, I suspect your aunt's partner perished because your parents refused to have more children. Then they had you, and your aunt held on only long enough to see you sent to the United States."

My heart ached for the woman I couldn't remember meeting. "Where does that put the leaders of this group?"

Noah chuckled, but there was no joy in the sound. "In a very precarious situation. If this organization is after your parents' apparent immortality, and they produced you, a child who seemingly cannot be killed by normal means, then the base congregation is probably on the verge of rioting over it. You might be able to trick them into sacrificing their leadership to appease you, someone they view to be a goddess."

Jake snorted, and he followed up with one of his soft huffs. "You mean to have them sacrifice their own leadership."

"When you cultivate the power of belief in someone, expect that someone

to use the power cultivated. Your parents have had the power they might have possessed beaten out of them with the murder of their children. They are beings of love,” Noah explained. “Marking the souls already uses more of their power and authority than they like, for all the powers they wield have more than obeyed them. Power is only power with the right willingness to use it. They’re Tibetan at heart, and their beliefs are such where they have not been able to break free of the prisons they imposed upon themselves. I don’t actually believe their sanctuary blocks their power. I believe that they believe it does, because that is what they have been told is fact for thousands upon thousands of years. Magic only works if you believe it will work—and they did not believe they possessed any magic capable of protecting their children while in the Heart of Refuge.”

“Is he correct, Maurice? Is that something these people—and my parents—would culturally do?”

“There’s substance to the theory. Western religions are not like what Tibetans typically abide by. It’s far more ingrained in their lifestyle. You, for example, were named Karma after one of those basic beliefs. You’ve become an embodiment of what karma is. We’re not sure what you would have been named otherwise—or if you would have been named at all.”

I read between the lines: It was entirely possible my parents hadn’t named my murdered brothers and sisters to help lessen the anguish of their loss.

Names made it harder to let go.

Jake gave my hand another squeeze. “Are you going to tell her parents about the possibility they could use their magic in their sanctuary?”

“No.”

Maurice’s immediate answer relieved me, as I couldn’t imagine how they’d react if they learned there was the possibility they might have been able to save the many other children they’d lost over the years.

“May I inquire on why?”

Something about Jake’s tone indicated he had an answer, but he wanted

to investigate what the translator felt about the situation.

“Enough harm has been done to them. That’s a decision the Chinese and American Inquisition made together, assuming we can substantiate our thoughts. There were a lot of parents in the room, and we all agreed on one thing: it would destroy us if we were in their situation and we could have acted but had not solely because of something we’d been trained to believe. We already have a few cover stories set up in case the subject comes up, and we’ll seed in a few possibilities and mistruths to spare them. The possibility does exist they can’t use their magic there, but even if we find confirmation that they can, it is best to let that sleeping beast alone.”

I nodded, as did Jake. When everyone stayed quiet, I stared out the window at the vast green landscape below, a mix of fertile fields and thick forest. “How long will it take for us to reach Tibet?”

Noah twisted around to face me, gracing me with a grin. “We’ll be in the air for a total of six hours. The flight is just on the upper limits of this plane’s fuel capacity, so we’ll be refueling before we enter Tibet. Tibet is arid, especially compared to here. It won’t be long until we see mountains in earnest, and you can spot some hills out the window even now. Interested in hearing about some of the local history as we fly?”

I perked up at the idea of spending the flight seeing the sights and hearing about China’s history rather than worrying even more over the fate of my parents and their circumstances. “Actually, yes. I’d love that.”

“Then we’ll begin with here. Beihai is a city in Guangxi, very young compared to the rest of China’s history. She was founded officially in 1949, although she was inhabited earlier than that. There are Western influences on the city still standing, built as early as 1876. While young, she is fierce and rapidly grows.” Noah pointed to some farmland outside the window. “To our right, you can see supporting farmland for the area’s various seaports. Beihai thrives on trade, so a lot of these crops will find their way to Beihai before being exported or distributed elsewhere in China.”

Using Beihai as a launching point, Noah crawled his way backwards in time, with the country's vibrant history growing richer the farther inland we flew. Not to be outdone, the Chinese members of our little group, which consisted of Maurice and two other men who introduced themselves as Francis and Leon, added to Noah's teachings with the stories only those who'd grown up in the country would know, painting a new picture of China for me, centered around the people who walked gingerly under the eye of their government.

Through the flight, I couldn't help but wonder what we would learn in Tibet and how it would change us all.

EIGHTEEN



“How’d they get past security?”

ON A NORMAL DAY, limited flights flew into Xigazê, with larger hubs in China serving as funneling points for the Tibetan airport. With a little help from the Chinese government, we arrived five hours before my parents were due.

Any other day, they would have needed at least thirty hours to make the journey from Beihai, requiring several connections to reach the remote location.

While small, the airport held numerous modern charms, although I learned to appreciate the boarding gates of American airports. The plane was small enough to have its own steps, which were steep and tested my nerves.

Jake helped by escaping first, and he plucked me out of the belly of the beast before I could make a fool out of myself balking at the height. Capturing me in a hug, he held me close for a long moment before setting me loose so he could retrieve our bags.

Noah got out of the plane last, and a pair of witches boarded, waited until we were clear, and taxied towards a nearby hangar. Once the plane was at a safe distance, he said, “It seems Greenwich has converged within the airport. Monitoring witches and Fenerec report that the only Normals present are confirmed staff. They’re being quietly replaced with our operatives now, and the building should be clear within ten minutes. The government has

requested that we leave the structures standing but that we're welcome to make as much of a mess as we'd like otherwise. We're already getting reports back that a hefty number of violent fugitives are present. The government decided to check global criminal records against the airports facial recognition systems."

"How'd they get past security?"

"Greenwich operators were running the specific lines they used. China is moving to apprehend the traitorous airport employees across the country. They're getting into position now, and they're waiting for word on when we're done with our activities here."

A chill ran through me as I realized we were changing the world.

I never thought I would be able to do such a thing.

"While it's usually difficult to tell, you just paled, Karma. What's wrong?" Jake asked.

"We're changing everything."

My mate bent over to give my brow a kiss. "But we're changing it for the better. I'm surprised China is taking such an aggressive stance on this, but I'm grateful they're taking Greenwich seriously."

"My country wants to hold its own power," Maurice stated, and in his tone, I heard resignation. "Greenwich may interfere with that, so they're a threat worth disposing of. However, the improvement of relations between my government and yours is a good thing. One more of cooperation than competition. We still have our differences, and I do not expect things to remain cordial unless both countries put in a great deal of effort, but for this? We will work together. Greenwich has violated China's sovereignty."

I could readily believe China would be prepared to do anything necessary to protect its sovereignty. "What do you think is going to happen?"

"Bloodshed."

Maurice's immediate response concerned me, and heaving a sigh, I turned my saddest eyes on Jake. "I'm going to need my gun."

“I’ve got her here. You will not be separated from your baby for much longer, I promise you. But, if they do not do anything hostile, we will not be opening fire. We need actual provocation.”

As I agreed with him, I nodded. “The fugitives are going to be a problem.”

“China will bargain.” Maurice crouched, open his bag, and pulled out a soft-shelled case. Opening it, he revealed the parts of a compact machine gun, which he began to assemble with practiced ease. To my dismay, I discovered Francis and Leon possessed similar weapons and sufficient ammunition to slaughter everyone in the airport ten times over. “We are hoping this will serve as a deterrent. They are unarmed. We are armed. We will make an example out of someone if we must, but China would rather have as many alive as possible—and bargains will be made for those who betray their organization. This is not the resolution your parents will appreciate, but it is fair.”

“Will China issue pardons?” I asked.

“No. Their punishments will simply be humane until the end of their lives. Should execution be selected, it will also be done humanely. For those who refuse? Death will come swiftly and without mercy.” The translator checked his weapon, strapped it around his neck, and gave a satisfied nod. “Remember, Karma—no one in that airport is innocent. They are all marked with the aura, and the only way someone is marked with the aura is if they are directly involved with murder. From what we understand, their magic has determined knowledge, acceptance of the murder, and a refusal to protest the murder are the basic criteria for being directly responsible. These are not innocent bystanders who deserve care and caution from us. They’re murderers. Some didn’t fire the gun or wield the knives, but they knew what they helped to accomplish. More importantly, they agreed with the deaths. Including infants.”

My fox was of the opinion we should grab a machine gun and open fire

and lay waste to our enemies, making certain they never bothered us again.

I wanted to temper her vengeance with justice and mercy. “Will China be cruel to them?”

“I would count on it. What they did goes beyond being just cruel. They deserve their fate, however swiftly it might come.”

After working so hard to redeem myself—and watching Jake struggle to redeem himself—the idea that everyone involved would not have a chance to do the same sickened me. However, one truth came to light, one that would make the rest of the day easier to bear.

Jake and I both classified as victims, and a hefty part of our various redemptions involved rising above what had been done to us. We’d both done our fair share of sins, but our reasons for our sins mattered.

They had killed—and supported the killings—for the sake of their greed.

“All of them, though? Aren’t there hundreds of people in that building?”

“There are,” Maurice confirmed.

Fuckers. “And how many of them have the red and black auras?”

“Most. There are a few who we believe are originally from the American branch who do not, but all of the people who are present seem to have been involved and supported the murder of your siblings, the murder of your aunt, and the attempt to murder you. They are all older people now, although we suspect some were younger children at the time of the murders. From what we can tell from our surveillance, the youngest is forty-seven.”

My fox needed no other convincing; she was ready to rip everyone in the airport apart. I, however, still had scruples about the whole situation. “We’ll try to talk first, and if they agree to bring the rest of Greenwich crashing down, while heavily monitored by China, then they walk out of here alive. And if not, well, I guess we’ll have a lot of cleaning up to do. But let’s try to avoid shattering the big windows and putting bullet holes in the walls. That’s expensive to repair.” My fox disliked the idea of leaving any of them alive, but if we could turn our enemies into tentative allies to bring the rest of the

group down, I would dance with any devil to cross my path to see it happen. “If they can be cultivated to betray the rest of Greenwich, we cultivate them.”

Everyone stared at me, and even my mate raised a brow.

“There’s no justice in murder,” I reminded them. “They have come unarmed. If they show us peace, then we will show them peace—and China can deal with their crimes by the law. This is not refusing to hold them accountable for murder. This is just refusing to murder the defenseless.” As I was aware the incident at the shrine would be mentioned, I added, “Those who came at us in Japan came into a trap, trying to get at me and my mate. This is different. Those men were wanted, armed, and dangerous. These people are wanted, possibly dangerous, but have come unarmed. We will not slaughter them.”

Maurice and the other Chinese representatives bowed. “As long as they do not display violence towards you, we will not be violent. We will save our violence solely as an act of retaliation or prevention.”

I could accept that. “We go in to negotiate. But we will show them we are armed—we will allow them to believe we are willing to use those arms as needed. But we pursue justice, not vengeance.”

In that, I would use my actions to establish how I wanted the world to work—even if it meant I couldn’t personally wring the life out of my aunt’s murderers.

Jake graced me with a tender smile. “I’m telling our therapist on you, and you might even be praised for your progress. I think that’s the first time I’ve heard you actually vocalize the importance of justice when discussing Greenwich.”

I nodded, as I suspected he was right. “There’s no justice in murder.”

Maybe this time, I would believe it.



THE CHINESE MEMBERS of our group led the way and permitted their compact machine guns to do the talking. The wise, upon seeing the weapons, cleared space without needing any instruction. Sure enough, everyone I saw, with a few exceptions of witches and Fenerec along the walls, were marked in either a red or a black and red aura.

Those with the black and red auras made up the vast majority of those present, and my fox raged at the sight of so many who had wanted to see us dead as an infant, utterly defenseless. I couldn't even begin to imagine my mother's grief and pain, watching her children be murdered time and time again.

As Maurice claimed, nobody in the airport, outside of the Inquisition, seemed young.

Here and there, I spotted a youthful face, but I slated that as a case of good genetics or a truly young age upon learning—and agreeing with—the deaths of my family members.

Had I seen them in a crowd, I would have thought them ordinary people doing ordinary things.

They caught sight of me and stared, likely puzzled by my blouse, jeans, and my gun holstered at my side. Silence reigned, and our footsteps squeaked as rubber-soled shoes often did on immaculately cleaned airport tiles.

Then, to my horror, the entire lot of them got to their knees, stretched their hands over their heads, and bowed, pressing their faces to the ground and stretching in my general direction. They repeated the bow a total of three times before remaining on the ground, lying in a prone position.

I came to one conclusion: they were religious fanatics, just like Noah had suspected.

The group consisted of men and women of equal number, and I eyed them, isolating a woman who had only the faintest of a red aura surrounding her. As she was some twenty or thirty feet into the crowd, I stepped around the prone bodies until I reached her. I was aware of Jake tensing, his hand

poised over his firearm.

“Jake, relax. You know I can beat you to the draw even rusty, so don’t act like you’re going to be saving me today.”

He huffed, and he puffed, but he lowered his hand.

I nudged the woman I’d selected with my toe, targeting the side of her leg so I wouldn’t inadvertently cause her pain. “Do you speak English?”

“I do,” came the muffled reply. She also said something in a language I did not recognize.

“Maurice?”

“She is speaking a prayer of gratitude. I don’t recognize the dialect, but it’s close enough to Sherpa I’m following.”

That supported the religious fanaticism suspicion.

“Why are you here?” I asked her.

“To praise you, for you survived, and to worship the god and the goddess who brought you into the world.”

My eyes crossed at her commentary, and I was grateful she couldn’t see my expression, lying prone as she was. “Who do you think I am?”

“You are the shining moon, a goddess of retribution, who comes in the night to bring light to the world.”

Apparently, Greenwich had taken the ‘moon’ meaning of my name and run with it. Or, at least, some of the members had. After taking a moment to consider my options, I crouched beside her and asked, “Why do you think I’m a goddess of retribution?”

“You will rain destruction down on those who forced the sacrifice of your blood-kin to wake your divinity,” she replied, her voice full of confidence.

She was not wrong, although she had no idea of how much truth she spoke. During my FBI training, I’d been taught to identify religious fervor, but it had been in a context of active terrorism events and attempted negotiations rather than being the subject of worship. “Can you tell me about those who forced the sacrifice?”

Those were the ones I wanted, and my fox stilled, tense and waiting in the hopes of having someone to strike.

“Oh, yes,” she breathed. “I can do that. We all can. We are all here because we have seen your light. We saw you pluck the life of a sacrifice from the hands of destruction. We saw you preserve life. You are the shining moon.”

There were only two cases I could think of with my direct involvement involving anyone actually being saved: Annabelle Greenwich and Jacob Peters. “Do you mean the baby or the boy?”

“Both,” she replied. “But you began with the baby. You made it clear, then, that you are the true retribution against sins they preached of, not them. You do not sacrifice.”

Well, I had a tendency to be ready and willing to sacrifice myself, but I wouldn’t tell her that. I might end up bent over an altar for all I knew. “How did you know to gather here?”

“We saw your bringers of life in the airport, and we heard whispers of your presence with them, reunited after long years of sacrifice. We hear the whispers seeking vengeance for the loss of your blood-kin. We hear the whispers, and we answer.”

My parents must have done something other than mark their souls, but until I could ask them, I would assume there was substance to her claim rather than a case of severe psychosis. In the United States, cults sometimes showed up, and between the brainwashing of the leadership’s victims and their seclusion from society, psychosis was one of many problems.

Some recovered.

Some didn’t.

Still, for my parents’ mark to be as dim as it was, she likely fell into the brainwashed category, inducted at an early age. That thought kept my fox at bay, although she made it clear she abhorred everything those bowing held dear.

“You know what I’m after, then?”

The woman sat up and repeated the series of three bows before resuming her prone position. “You want those who hold true responsibility for the loss of your blood-kin. You want those who want to usurp your power rather than worship all that you represent. They defy the very Earth, wanting your power for their own.”

Well, I could work with destroying Greenwich through using their own members. To my disgust, she had me dead to rights.

“You’re correct. Those who hold true responsibility for shedding the blood of innocents? They displease me greatly. Get to your feet, and if everyone here doesn’t speak English, you will translate. But if you seek absolution, there might be a way to earn it. But you have generations upon generations of shed blood, all of innocents, to atone for.” I allowed my anger to enter my tone, and I said, “You begin with telling us all you know about those who are truly behind this—those who darkened your hearts against babies, mothers, and fathers.”

While I wanted my parents to receive justice, there were people who no longer had a voice. Their premature deaths had spared me, in some ways, from the biting grief of loss at an early age, but the truth remained.

They deserved justice.

“Yes. We can do this.”

“When I arrived in the United States, still an infant, there was a couple who accepted me into their home. They did so out of the kindness of their hearts and a wish for a child.”

“Oh, yes. We know of them. Nobody liked that job. They adored you. We were forced to study them, learn about them, and take you when they were alone and vulnerable. You cried your protest, and we felt the very Earth grieve with you.” She paused long enough to repeat the series of bows. “We knew what we did was wrong. I was the one who slipped you away to someone you could trust. I did it while the others looked the other way, and

we told the sinners that you had not survived the strain of the journey to the United States.”

Well, we’d gotten some of the story right.

Greenwich had killed my first adoptive parents.

“Why did you kill them like a fox?”

“It was all we could do.”

The pain of her words reminded me of the times I’d been engulfed in the sea of endless hopelessness, unable to do anything other than struggle to catch even a single breath of air. “You were sending a message.”

“Yes. We’re not like the others, who simply kill. We killed because we must. I was just old enough to no longer be sacrificed for disobedience, but my brothers and sisters were not.”

My fox’s fury crested, and I clenched my hands into fists before forcing my fingers to relax. “They made you come to America to kill my adoptive parents?”

“Yes. It was my second mission. My first was to witness your rise as a goddess, to see your survival with my own eyes.”

What sort of monster forced a child to witness the slaughter of newborn babies? “How old are those they sacrifice?”

“You may no longer be sacrificed upon turning the age of six, Dawa.”

The way she spoke the name my aunt had gifted to me implied I was far more than some mere celestial being to her.

I struggled to make sense of what she said, failing to compute how anyone could force a child to murder another human being. How had she survived? How had she had any hope of clinging to even a vestige of sanity?

What sort of hell did the leadership of Greenwich put their followers through?

“All right. Please sit up—and tell those who don’t speak English to sit up.”

The woman did as told, and after a moment, she spoke in another

language. One by one, everyone sat up and rested their hands on their legs, waiting with eternal patience.

I cast a long look at Jake, and he considered the gathering, sighed, and came to my side, taking care to dodge the people kneeling on the floor. “Are you all right?”

“I’m really not,” I confessed. “I’ll get over it.”

He took hold of my hand and squeezed.

“Maurice?” I asked.

“What do you need?”

“I suspect there are a lot of people here who don’t speak English, and we’re going to be getting a lot of information. Can you handle the ones who speak this language while I talk to those who speak English? And can you do something about the information we gather?”

“I can.”

Drawing a deep breath, I held it until I struggled, then I let it loose in a slow, cleansing exhale. “What is your name?”

“Please, call me Rosalie. That is the name I use when I am in the United States.”

“All right, Rosalie. Tell those who can’t speak English that they need to tell Maurice the truth. Once you do that, I need to know everything about those who ordered innocents to be murdered for their ambitions. I want to know everything about them, but most of all, where I might find them.”

“I can’t tell you their location. I’m not high enough ranked for that. Some might be. We’re told to not talk about that. There might be a sacrifice if we talk among ourselves like that.” Rosalie said something in her language, and she climbed to her feet and bowed three times to Maurice. Most in the room headed in his direction, leaving me with Rosalie and a group of older men and three women.

“You are the operatives who work in the United States?” I guessed.

With twenty-five of them, if appropriately armed, they could accomplish

most murders with frightening ease, especially when the targets were defenseless families with knowledge rather than ways of protecting themselves.

“Yes, Dawa,” Rosalie replied, and she clasped her hands in front of her. “Our job was to handle any sacrifices of outsiders who refused to do the bidding of those in power.”

Aware I needed to work within the constraints of her religious beliefs, I said, “The sinners.”

“Yes.”

“Do you call them sinners because you are stripping them of the power of their names?”

The woman’s expression brightened. “Yes, that is exactly it. If we speak their names, they gain power. We call them as they are, sinners.”

“I’ve been calling them Greenwich, in the promise they would see justice for what they did to that baby girl and her family.”

“Yes, their defiance angered the sinners. That was the last piece they truly needed to complete one of their plans. That setback cost them years. They did not anticipate the father’s dedication to his country. The sinners did not anticipate the mother’s dedication to her country. Both parents would have accepted the loss of that baby. The sinners still do not understand. Had one of those Americans cracked, everything would have changed. But they did not.”

“Do you know what the plan would have been?”

“If the sinners had received copies of the code, they would have been able to utilize the nuclear weapon codes. They would have begun with the systematic destruction of government buildings in key countries, yours included.”

Jake’s grip on my hand tightened.

How close had Greenwich come to destroying everything I held dear? Had disaster been averted by minutes? Seconds? Would Annabelle’s death have broken the man who held the power Greenwich had wanted?

The possibilities staggered me. Rather than falter, I stared into the woman's eyes and said, "They meant to start a nuclear war? Or winter?" Those were the two possibilities I could think of for wanting to start nuking the governments of numerous countries.

"They wished for the winter to come, long and deep to eradicate the unwanted elements of humanity. We would have retreated to Refuge, and we would have lived within the heart of the mountain, keeping guard over the foxes while they slumbered to the next age. Then we would have seen to their rise. Now that you have been born, the sinners want more gods and goddesses backing them. The sinners believe those who gave you life have been broken. The Earth whispers otherwise, and we believe." Rosalie's gaze fell on Jake. "May I ask who he is?"

"He's my husband."

Faster than I could blink, the whole lot of them threw themselves to the ground and bowed before Jake three times before flattening themselves as far down as they could.

Much like a ripple in the pond, the other fanatics joined in, and I doubted they had a clue in hell why they were bowing to him.

Jake lifted a hand and pressed his fingertips to his temple. "Let me guess. I'm now a god."

"You are." As there weren't many who could witness me do it, I leered at my husband. "At certain times, when you're properly doing your duty."

He mouthed something at me, which I assumed was a promise I would be paying for my commentary at a later time, in bed, where he could put on a good show solely for my benefit.

"You can rise," I said, and sighing, I added, "Please tell the others to as well. I've no use for posturing. I only need those responsible for everything to be lured out somewhere I can wring the life out of their pathetic bodies."

"She takes the retribution part of things quite seriously," Jake said, and he took care to keep his tone gentle. "Who was behind the London shooting?"

Was it these sinners?”

“Yes. We were to test her immortality. The sinners demanded it, or they would begin the next wave of sacrifices. We have seen your picture, but we did not know then that you have been gifted with immortality as well. But you are her husband. Of course, she would grant you her gift of immortality.” Rosalie got to her feet, and she bowed to Jake. “The sinners wanted to know more about you, but they could not find anything special, and it was not worth the risk; you were under close watch by outsiders, and it would have risked our exposure.”

Right. Fenerec could withstand injuries that would kill Normals like them, and it would not take much for a religious fanatic to believe he had immortality rather than a severe case of wolf. “Are the sinners aware there are so many of you who know of their sins?”

“They value our dedication to the cause,” Rosalie replied, and her tone changed to one of utter disgust. “They lost sight of our cause, and they failed to understand that by awakening a goddess of retribution, they would be the ones to face retribution. We are prepared to pay for our sins. We knew that this day would come. We must be made pure so that we might have a chance at another life.”

Once I made it back to the United States, I would request retraining on the subject of religious fanatics and martyrs. That way, I might have a better idea of what to do if I happened to need to negotiate with them.

“How can we get these sinners to show up?”

Rosalie smiled. “That is simple. We will tell them of the return of your givers of life, and they will show up to monitor the situation—and issue threats about what will happen to the next of your blood-kin should they not produce more children. We are not monitored so closely that most of us cannot reach Refuge before their arrival, and then we can strike and make the sinners pay for the crimes they have committed against you and the Earth.”

If the religious fanatics wanted to guide us to my parents’ sanctuary and

put an end to the leaders themselves, so be it. “And all of them will attend?”

“All those who decide who live and who die will be in attendance. The rest are easy enough to find. They are not the dragons twisted to evil.”

I considered the others in the group capable of speaking English, and I settled on the one with the strongest aura of red and black, a bent old man with a graying beard that hung halfway down to his knees. Any other time, I would have marveled at its length. “Why did you change your heart?”

“You honor me, Dawa. I changed because I saw your light. I end my days, and I have stained my skin and my soul with the blood of too many children. This redemption will never be enough, but I take this first step and hope for a chance at another life so that I might do better next time.”

“Your life has more value than your death, and I expect you to all remember that. I expect these sinners to pay for their sins in death so they may not hurt another. But I expect you to live and repay the debts you owe to the dead who no longer have a voice. Today, retribution is removing those who have not seen their sins. And when this is done, my retribution will be to see that you all spend your every last breath working to undo the tragedies you have wrought.”

Rosalie bowed three times, as did the others in the group. “It will be as you wish, Dawa.”

NINETEEN



“Those who like being worshipped are crazy.”

AN HOUR before my parents were scheduled to land, Xigazê’s airport reopened. The Chinese government handled the details of the closure, and Maurice took my gun along with Jake’s, promising we’d have them back in a better environment.

According to the witches, the defectors were the personification of sincerity, bordering on entering a state of religious fervor. I struggled to cope with their view of me—and of Jake.

We were far from being what they thought of us, and neither of us were truly immortal.

At my request, the group scattered to gather everything we would need to make the journey to Mount Everest, which they called Refuge because that was what my parents called the mountain. According to a map Rosalie referenced, we would be hiking for more than a hundred miles through a tunnel and cavern system cutting through the Himalayan mountains.

It turned the journey from perilous to safe, and once within the mountains, the temperature regulated to a chilly forty degrees, warming to a pleasant seventy deep within the sanctuary itself. As we had not come prepared for venturing to one of the most treacherous places on Earth, Rosalie took it upon herself to gather the supplies we would need to make the journey as humans.

I expected to transform into my fox shape to ensure they continued to believe.

If it brought the true heart of Greenwich crashing down, I would do more than prance around as an oversized fox prone to chittering at anyone who bothered Jake.

Uncertain of what might happen, I turned to Maurice and asked, “Would it be wise for us to travel using an alternative way?”

With uninvolved Normals in the airport, I didn’t dare to mention our ability to shapeshift.

“Yes. Once we are out of the vehicles at our next stop, it would be wise. I’ve already notified the pilot of your parents’ plane that the situation here has been defused and that we have some allies. I asked that they be warned that they have to work with some of these people to lure out the ones truly responsible.”

“I’ll talk to them when they arrive,” I promised.

“Thank you.” Maurice nodded in the direction of the gate where my parents would enter the building. “While we’ve impressed upon them that you should not be bothered unless it is important, we’re dealing with those truly dedicated to their beliefs. They will want to see you and your mate. Doing as you suggest will cement those beliefs, but we may also have to deal with more bowing.”

“What was that bowing, anyway?”

“Bowing three times is something done by monks in the region to show respect. They took it to extremes, which doesn’t surprise me in the slightest,” he replied. “I have no idea what will happen with your parents should they be the recipients of the bowing or if it’s something they’re accustomed to already. I was not expecting a fragment group like this throwing themselves at us here.”

“Neither were we.” I regarded Jake with wide eyes. “Those who like being worshipped are crazy.”

“I like worshipping you,” he replied, and he raised a brow.

I scowled, at a loss of how to reply.

Maurice laughed at us. “I’ll leave you two to sort that out while you wait for your parents to arrive. Do your best to intercept them and prevent any incidents. I’m going to check on the status of our new friends and inquire with our team if there is any evidence of betrayal.”

Once he departed, Jake dragged me over to the gate, picked a set of seats, and huffed and puffed until I sat down. The assertive behavior made me giggle, as he’d become less likely to display aggression unless it involved a bed. “Are you trying to teach the Tibetans you sometimes get to be the boss?”

“I’m making you sit because my feet hurt watching you stand.”

I complied as we had been on our feet longer than I preferred. “You need new shoes?”

“I really do, and I haven’t found a good pair yet. These are going to be destroyed by the time we’re done this trip.”

I leaned over to regard his feet, determining his shoes had undergone significant wear and tear. “I had not noticed that. I’m going to have to pay more attention to the state of your shoes.”

“I have questions.”

“I probably don’t have any viable answers, but I’m happy to check on the internet to see if it knows all.”

He snorted at me. “What sort of gear are we going to need to get to this place in the summer?”

“My answer was correct. I have no idea, and I’m happy to check online to see if there are answers to be found.” I dug my phone out of my pocket and went about the tedious process of logging on to the internet. Had I just gone with my standard connection, I would have been locked to China-approved websites, where my special login gave me access to just about anything I wanted. The Chinese Inquisition members had warned me my activities would be tracked, but I was on the list of those approved to have full access

to the internet.

I'd been given a warning to be very cautious about the use of social media, but I assured them I didn't use any in the first place, as I didn't have time or energy to dedicate to such things.

The internet issue made it clear we'd stepped into a completely different world than what I was accustomed to. Aware my searches would be scrutinized, I looked up conditions at the Tibetan Everest base camp for a better idea of what to expect.

According to the weather site, we could expect to emerge resembling drowned rats. Our coats weighed a ton when soaked, although mine did a better job of repelling water than Jake's did. "Ah. It's monsoon season, and the weather is putting on a show. We're going to be wading through rain and mud getting anywhere, and it looks like there are road closures closer to the mountains due to the abnormally high rainfall the region is receiving."

"Well, that explains the supplies, then, if we're going to have to hike because our vehicles might not make it." Jake sighed. "Maybe we should ask them for dog sleds."

As part of my general training, I'd been taught how to haul a sled in case someone was injured and somebody needed to get them out of a bind. "Do Tibetans do dog sledding?"

"Well, the Tibetan mastiffs are definitely large enough to pull sleds, and they're work dogs. I wouldn't be surprised. Are you going to be able to handle any canine companions that may show up?"

I lifted my chin, issued a soft warning chitter, and refused to look at him. "That depends entirely on if I get to keep a puppy."

"If I were offered a pair of Tibetan mastiffs, I would not be refusing. They're great guardian dogs, and they could protect our entire litters of children." Jake bumped me with his elbow. "I'm not above asking if there are any available puppies if it will keep the peace with the older dogs."

I giggled, as I'd lost my mind once when an intact female dog had

showed a little too much interest in Jake. While I hadn't done anything to the animal other than chitter my displeasure, my fox had wanted to pick a fight.

My fox enjoyed the company of spayed and neutered dogs, as they reminded her of more companionable versions of wolves—and not the kind prone to stealing our dinner should we lower our guard.

“There you go. Now you're starting to relax a little. I thought you were going to blow a gasket, shift, and start rebuking everybody with bites for a while there. You handled yourself very well. You didn't chitter, not once.”

“I wanted to, but probably not for the reason you think. We know they're guilty, they know they're guilty, and damn it, I just can't slaughter a bunch of guilty people who have remorse.”

“That's what makes you a good woman, Karma.”

“And now I'm going to have to explain to my parents why we can't slaughter the remorseful people who are going to try to help us lure the masterminds out so we can slaughter them. And I'm expecting submissive behavior out of them when those assholes show up because they've been living in fear for thousands of years, watching their children be slaughtered time and time again—all because they didn't want to sacrifice anyone else.”

“Yeah, that part of the whole thing bothers me, and I can get how they'd be torn and tormented over it. I can't even imagine having to choose between a family member that has been family for potentially millions of years over newborns.”

“There's no right or wrong answer to it.”

“There really isn't,” he agreed. “It is all a matter of circumstances. How many other people would have lost their lives if they had not allowed them to kill their children?”

“I didn't think of that.”

“I'm assuming that's the case because of what that Rosalie woman said. Disobedience was punished with sacrifice. I don't think these assholes care how many children they kill, although I am concerned there might be a

sorcerer among them.”

“A sorcerer?”

“Someone who harvests pain and suffering for magic. How better to get a good harvest than to slaughter the children of fanatical worshippers? The agony of the parents’ grief, the suffering of the children upon death, it all points to something a sorcerer would do—and a sorcerer might be able to block your parents from using their powers.”

Fuck. “So that could be real?”

“A sorcerer might be in a position to make global domination plans a reality with enough cannon fodder—or infant sacrifice.”

“How do we kill a sorcerer?”

“Aim a gun at their head, fire. They’re human, and they have human weaknesses. As long as the sorcerer doesn’t take you over or paralyze you, you’ll be able to tear them apart easily. It’s entirely possible your parents were unable to act, overpowered by a sorcerer who’d just gained power from the slaughter of their children. It’s harder for a sorcerer to overwhelm numerous people at one time. I’m betting he expects his flock to do as told. If the flock is on our side but the sorcerer believes that the flock is on his side, they can do what we might not be able to.”

“I’ll make certain they know they’re to get the kills as soon as an opportunity allows.” Never again would these people hurt another soul. Sorcerer or not, their days were numbered, and I would enjoy crossing out each day as we got closer to our goal. “I’m not against being some goddess of retribution right now, Jake. In fact, it’s quite to my liking. That’s precisely what these assholes are going to get. They will pay.”

“They will.” Jake reached over and gave my leg a pat. “How are you holding up otherwise?”

“I’m not looking forward to this trip. We’re going to drown during the day and freeze during the night. It gets cold here even in the summer.”

“Well, we’re going to be venturing into the mountains. It’s to be

expected. I'm more concerned about what you'll do if you happen to come across a tree or a cliff to climb."

"Asshole," I muttered.

"It's a great joy of my life being the one you call an asshole."

"I'm going to have to ask your father if he dropped you on your head as a baby."

"I'm pretty sure I wasn't dropped on my head as a baby. They just expected me to be the king of their castle when the only castle I want to rule is yours."

"I have a castle?"

"Bedroom, castle... close enough."



MY PARENTS FIDGETED, and before they could jump out of their skins, I got out of my seat, hopped over to them, and said, "We're going to your refuge, and we're taking a bunch of turncoats with us. They're going to make arrangements for the problem to come pay us a visit, after which they won't be a problem anymore."

Jake took his time coming to join us, and he laughed. "If you had a tail, you'd be whipping it back and forth in glee, Karma. Please don't mind her. After a bunch of people started literally worshipping her, it did the exact opposite of going to her head. They've dubbed her a goddess of retribution, and she finds her role to her liking, but she's determined worship is not something she wants aimed in her general direction."

"What do you mean?" my mother asked.

Taking a deep breath to soothe my nerves and calm myself, I filled my parents in on what had happened upon reaching the airport. Once done, I said, "We had people on hand to verify the truth, and they seem to be

genuine.”

“Us, worshipped?” my mother blurted.

“You have a case of thousands of years of people being brought into a cycle, convinced it’s essentially a religion, and you’re the center of it. I’m guessing Greenwich’s leadership hasn’t realized they took some elements of their controlling a little too far. Because I’m alive, some parts of the group have fallen into a state of religious fervor over the matter.”

My father regarded my mother with a frown before staring at me. “We did not have much exposure to many people, just the one that would kill our children and a few others.”

“The few others are likely the masterminds being Greenwich—and why you can’t use your powers in the refuge.” I eyed Jake. “He knows of some people who gain power from killing innocents, and I think his idea is sound.”

My father’s cheek twitched.

Meeting my gaze, my mother asked, “Are you sure about this?”

“Hundreds of people came here, unarmed, and basically groveled. When I told them I wanted those who ordered the innocents killed, they began making plans, gathering supplies, and working to lure the bastards to us so we can deal with them. If magic won’t work, we have tools that will. I think it’s an opportunity we can’t afford to ignore.” Shrugging, I urged my parents to take a seat with us where we’d set up camp, and I offered them each a bottle of water. “The one woman seems infernally sweet and absolutely tortured over what she’s been through. If they didn’t obey, their families were also sacrificed.”

My parents winced.

“Yeah, that alone made me pause for quite a bit. Those who came here are definitely fanatical, and I think we can use that to our benefit. I’ve already told them their lives are worth more than their deaths, and that the ones I wanted to see rotting were the masterminds behind the murders. They were prepared to pay any cost.”

My father's expression softened. "She's making a good point, my love. Karma's friend has been quite firm about reminding us we may not be the only victims involved in this."

Accepting the status as a victim hurt, and I marveled at how my father shouldered the burden. I spotted the friend in question, and Mellisa waved and headed our way.

"Having a good time with your new patients?" I asked, grinning at the woman.

"I'm challenged to say the least. We were warned of trouble. How bad is it?"

"I'm being worshipped as a goddess of retribution, and I don't like it, Mellisa."

Mellisa raised a brow at me. "I'm sure I can come up with an appropriate treatment plan given some time and more relevant information. I prefer that you don't like it, because therapy plans for the opposite problem are a bit trickier. Jake, I'm assigning you as her current therapy plan in the interim. You know what to do."

My husband snickered. "I think I can handle the basics. We're going to be going on a bit of a hike, and it's their monsoon season. Karma has determined we are all going to look like drowned rats in short order."

"Drowned rat is not a good look on me, but I'm sure I'll manage. What's our goal?"

"We're planning on taking out the leaders of Greenwich after some of our new friends lure them to the refuge."

"We're going to Mount Everest?"

"We're going inside Mount Everest, apparently. And from what we've learned, it's going to be a lot of hiking through a tunnel and cavern system."

"Yes," my father confirmed. "There are a few entrances into the mountain system. They descend below the surface of the Earth. There are markers to show the way, although the route can be treacherous for the uninitiated. Only

a few have entered our refuge, but those few have been damaging enough.”

“I’m suspecting a sorcerer, Mellisa,” Jake said, careful to keep his voice low.

The witch cursed. “I know most of the common counters for their basic powers, and I’ll make sure to use it on as many of us as I can. That would explain a few things I wasn’t certain about. Why do you suspect a sorcerer?”

“Who else would benefit from the slaughter of infants in arms, using such ‘sacrifices’ as a disciplinary tool? Once the children are six, they’re inducted into the cult properly. Until then, they’re fodder for sacrifice.”

“Those motherfuckers,” Mellisa hissed through clenched teeth.

“Karma did not take that news well, but she held her temper—she didn’t even chitter once, not until we were off to ourselves and I was annoying her.”

“Asshole.” I stole from him and issued a huff. “What do we need to know about sorcerers?”

“I think you’ve figured out the basics. They harvest power through pain, suffering, and death. I’ll make sure our team is kitted for a sorcerer—or more than one. It’s probably an entire coven of the bastards. In any case, we will make certain they die swiftly. Frankly, I don’t give a shit if there’s mercy involved or not, but if they’re using sorcerers, they don’t deserve any mercy whatsoever.” Mellisa cracked her knuckles. “Now that I know what’s going on, I’ll get together with Amelia, get us kitted with what we have available, and make sure we keep a close guard on you. Fanatics get, well, fanatical.”

“Jake got worshipped, too. He really didn’t like it.”

Our therapist rolled her eyes. “Did you tell them you were married?”

“I introduced him as my husband, and they flung themselves to their knees and started bowing. I had to tell them to stop smashing their faces against the floor.”

“I’ll ask one of the locals if they believe in handmaidens here. If so, I’ll have Amelia shift and make her your guardian, following after those dogs or lions your parents created in Japan.”

“Where are those dog things, anyway?”

My parents pointed in the direction of the plane, and sure enough, after everyone had escaped, two stone dog-lions emerged, and they prowled our way. They sat nearby and waited.

“That’s not at all creepy. What are we going to do with them?”

“They will guard as needed and kill as needed. I have given them the responsibility of smelling intent,” my mother stated. “They ignore past transgressions and only consider the current state of the soul they’re examining. We shall see what these cultists truly believe soon enough.”

I eyed the statues, which contained the souls of Richard’s parents. “If you lie about any of those souls, you’ll find out I’m more than happy to become a goddess of retribution. We clear?”

Both statues nodded.

“Good.”

TWENTY



The witch often saw things I wished she
wouldn't.

TO MY PARENTS' disgust, every marked soul passed the dog-lions' tests, of which there were three as far as I could tell. I supposed Chinese lore had their fair share of guardian spirits, because once the group stopped throwing themselves on the ground at my parents' feet, they made gestures and similar bows to the statues, although they were more restrained in their motions. Still respectful but lacking in the fanaticism I identified as us being what they believed in.

I wondered how long their secret religion had survived and how it had come to me being the primary driving force of their beliefs.

Rather than educate them on my mortality and lose our fighting chance of eradicating Greenwich, I kept my mouth shut. I claimed Rosalie as my translator, wondering how I'd deal with the Chinese government about the woman and her role in so much death and tragedy.

Of the lot of them, she had emerged scarred and damaged but not broken.

I feared death would be a mercy for most of them, who only had their religion and their leadership to cling to.

Life beyond Greenwich would be hard for them—and I would allow it to be hard, although I balked at the idea of being responsible for someone else's suffering.

But Rosalie? I could see her being useful.

Like me, she loved children, and I suspected the marks on her soul weren't her true willingness to kill but rather the stain of those deaths and her grief for her involvement. Later, I would ask Mellisa what she thought.

The witch often saw things I wished she wouldn't.

As staying in the airport would draw suspicion, we left, making use of the supplies provided to set up a camp a few miles away in the direction of the mountains, safe from prying eyes. Judging from their practiced motions, I suspected the group was required to sleep outside a lot.

Few of the tents were new, and the largest of them was given to me for my use. The second best went to my parents. The Chinese Inquisition came prepared, although upon learning our unexpected allies intended to camp, they only brought two of the RVs along.

The one was a mobile medical facility, and the Chinese had an earth witch capable of creating a road to where we needed to go. We'd still camp, but we'd be able to take the parade of vehicles deep into the mountains, far deeper than most could go in during the monsoon season.

Shortly after nightfall, the rain and wind started in earnest, but our guides had done us justice. The tent held, repelled the water, and kept the wind away. Rather than howl, it keened through the foothills leading towards the deepest reaches of the Himalayans.

"Well, this is cozy," Jake murmured, and he stretched out on top of the stacked sleeping mats. I'd given up protesting excess; one mat would have been fine, but they insisted on three each so we might be as comfortable as possible. "The instant we're home, I'm going to a camping store and spending a ridiculous amount of money on camping gear. Then I'm kidnapping you, and we're going camping."

"It's not kidnapping if I'm willing, Jake."

In the dim glow of the tent's little LED light, I spotted his pout. "Come on, Karma. Let me kidnap you just once."

"Do you want me to struggle, fake some screaming, and clap my hands to

my cheeks like some distressed damsel?”

“That would be nice.”

One day, I might understand how Jake ticked, although I suspected it was something relating to his submissive nature making him want to play out such a thing rather than actually indulge in a true kidnapping. “Okay. I’ll struggle, fake some screaming, and pretend like I absolutely don’t want to be kidnapped and taken to the woods to be devoured by a wolf.”

“I think two weeks will do. We might feel almost normal again after two weeks, right?”

Would we ever feel normal again? “Jake, there’s nothing normal about this. And let’s face it, there’s nothing normal about us. That’s all right. My parents have the cursed souls of a pair of bastards playing as guardian statues right now, and they’re using them to make sure Greenwich falls. That alone bars us from being able to pretend like we’re normal.”

“Do you think your parents are going to let those souls go?”

“Not for a long damned while, I suspect. Not after seeing their reactions to what happened to that submissive forced to be an Alpha.”

“If they can help Richard, Desmond is going to end up adopting them.”

I laughed at the idea of Charles Desmond adopting my parents. “If he thinks he can conquer that mountain, more power to him. If he tries to adopt my parents, he’s going to end up adopting however many are left of our family at the same time. I’m on to how he operates, and I haven’t even met him in person yet.”

“They could use it, and Desmond has a reputation of being what people need. I don’t know if he can undo thousands of years of damage, but he’ll try.”

That I believed without hesitation. “I did not expect to be camping outside, in China, during a monsoon, Jake.”

“I had expected dingy Chinese streets and political intrigue,” he replied. “There’s been some intrigue, but mostly, it’s been tragedy after tragedy with

everyone pointing at the place the worst of the tragedies occurred.”

“I’m worried about Rosalie,” I confessed.

The woman had gone to extremes trying to be useful and struggling to please everybody. I’d caught our therapist casting her concerned looks. I recognized bits of myself in her, desperate to find acceptance despite the situation, a hopeless one devoid of any light.

“We can try to take her back to the United States with us. I’m not sure we can, but we’re going to need a babysitter, and I don’t need any magic to know that woman loves kids.”

“And she was forced to help murder them.”

“Yeah. I don’t feel much in the way of sympathy for the others, but that woman? She’s been punished enough. And I’m not convinced her aura is colored as it is because of your parents’ magic. It seems off. I think she’s been broken.”

“They’re all broken, Jake.”

“Yeah, I guess they are.”

“The other women seem harder.”

“They’re older, and they’ve been in the cult longer. And I suspect she was deeply hurt witnessing your siblings being murdered. I don’t think you’re a goddess of retribution to her at all, but I absolutely do believe you’re the moon in her sky. You might set her free from the death and the tragedy. I suspect the others adapted to what they were forced into doing. But we won’t know that for certain until later.”

No, we wouldn’t—and I feared the answers we would find once the dust settled, and we left Greenwich behind us. “Do you think we can save her?”

“I think you already have. But can we try to give her a future, one without death and tragedy? That I can’t promise. It depends on how many murders she’s committed and if she can make a bargain. I don’t know if our word will have any sway. The best we can do is try. And that is something I can promise you. We’ll try.”



THE WEATHER REMAINED foul for an entire week, and even with an earth witch keeping the roads usable, as soon as we left the paved roads in the Xigazê area, our progress slowed. In good news for us, the leaders of Greenwich would make the journey by horse, and they would be even slower.

The Chinese Inquisition promised to save the animals if they could, as the journey would likely kill them from a mixture of weather and poor care. The turncoats had warned us we'd find graveyards of exposed horse skeletons, all of the animals unfit to be taken back to Xigazê.

To make sure Greenwich lagged, the earth witch made a point of turning the roads behind us into a bog, guaranteeing their horse trailers couldn't make it close to the mountains. I hoped the local wildlife could survive, but the witch bogged down every trail for ten miles to keep them from progressing and giving us a chance to reach Mount Everest long before they could.

The closer we got to the mountains, the harsher the landscape became, with little to no life on the wind-scoured rocks. The rain created flooding hazards, but my father handled that with a wave of his hand.

My mother took a few days, but she grew bold enough to help the earth witch, and between the two of them, we enjoyed an easy enough hike despite being soaked to the skin.

My father, at least, was able to dry out our gear, making our evenings pleasant enough, especially when he created earthen structures for us to cook and eat beneath before returning the soil to where he'd gotten it.

On the ninth day, we reached the first of the horse graveyards, and the bones had been scattered due to the recent rainfalls. An odd rock caught my attention, a darker color than the rest. I pointed at it and asked, "What's that?"

"A trail marker," my father replied, gesturing for me to follow him. He

guided me to the rock, and he pointed to where two stone materials clashed. “A long time ago, I coaxed this up from the deep places of the Earth to mark the way to Refuge. If you wait for sunrise and walk with the sun to your back, in two hours, you’ll find the next marker. For that one, you put the sun to your right side and continue your journey to find the next marker. Then you will continue to the west, following the trail markers and the curves of the mountains to find the entry to the caverns. We will arrive there by sunset. We will camp within the first cavern, and we will erase evidence of our passage so our prey follows in our wake unawares we are a group rather than returning alone in defeat. They will expect the passage of two, and that is what the evidence of their eyes will tell them, that only two returned through the caverns.”

Rather than ask how Greenwich had gained access to their refuge, I nodded, touching the marker to get a feel for the stone. It was hard, smooth, and polished beneath my fingertips. “Do you use the sun to find the next marker?”

“No. I know where they’re at. We won’t get lost, even if the clouds return and we can’t spot the sun. Save your worries for how we’ll best remove these sinners from the Earth.”

Upon hearing the turncoats refer to the leaders of Greenwich as sinners, my parents had taken the term and made it their own. Something had eased in them, as though they finally believed what the souls of the Murphys had conveyed regarding their innocence, such as it was.

The statues continued to follow us, and they stood silent guard. I found them unnerving at best, and I hoped that my parents would release their souls sooner than later. Then again, when I considered what I had witnessed in my father’s sands, an eternity of servitude would never be punishment enough.

Jake eyed the bones of the horses, and he growled.

Right. Jake liked horses. “We can ask the Chinese if we can adopt some of the abused horses, assuming any survive. I’m sure we can find a place to

keep them. If nobody else wants the poor things, we'll get them cared for and shipped to the United States."

Maurice chuckled. "I will make certain they understand the horses need to be sent to good homes, and if none can be found, that you will take them to America."

I smiled at the translator. "Thank you."

"I'm sure we can also make certain you meet some Tibetan mastiffs before your return home, although I'm not sure we can procure any of them. That's not something I've looked into, but your husband expressed your disappointment we would not be making use of any sled dogs on this venture. But yes, there are mastiffs used for sledding here. They often serve as guardians and rescue dogs, and they are trained in a variety of tasks. They would have been useful on this leg of the journey, but all will be well. We're only dealing with rain for now."

As the vehicles couldn't fit through the mountainous terrain safely, my father had hidden them within a cavern in the foothills. I had no idea if he'd created the place or if it had always been there, but once all the vehicles were parked safely inside, he'd closed the ground up again to prevent Greenwich from discovering them.

I turned to regard the hill, still visible despite having spent a few hours hiking. "It doesn't snow this time of year, does it?"

My father shook his head. "Not normally. The ground will frost, for it gets quite cold at night, and sometimes there will be some snow, but we are at a low enough elevation that it is not as bad as it could be. Worry not, my daughter. Soon enough, we'll be in the cavern system, and the journey becomes easier then. It is still long, but it is easier. I will show you where we can fish, and you will see some of the comforts we have gathered over the years."



MY FATHER HAD MASTERED the art of understatement in his life. While he had spoken the truth about the journey being easier, there were fish, and they had massive stockpiles of supplies in the cavern and tunnel system, time clearly meant nothing to him.

I counted days by how many times we slept, and it took us two weeks to make the journey from the entrance to the heart of Mount Everest. Rather than unworked caverns with smoothed trails, we stood before a stone archway. My mother stared at a spot nearby, and she sighed.

“What’s wrong?”

She gestured to a spot of stone. “You were born there, and that is where the rest of your litter died. I was walking as I often do when labor started, hard and swift. They had been standing vigil, aware of the pregnancy and wishing to carry out their plans.”

The turncoats all dropped to their knees and bowed towards the spot, and they chanted something in their language.

Having gotten used to the bowing and the groveling whenever my parents told me something about their past or pointed out a cavern landmark, I ignored them, although the chanting was a new addition to their routine.

“What are they saying?”

“They are begging for forgiveness for their sins,” my father stated in a weary tone. “The first part of the prayer is ritualistic, but they will confess all of the sins burdening their souls here. We will wait. We are far ahead of our pursuers, although they have reached the entry of the cavern system. They know the way well, and they’ll make better time than we did. They’ll sleep less and move faster. I’m listening for them.”

My poor father. What had he endured, being able to sense the approach of those essentially enslaving them for their cult? I doubted I would ever

understand. Then again, I didn't need to understand.

I needed to accept that my parents suffered from trauma. I would work around what they needed. I would even sympathize with them.

I didn't have to understand the specifics.

"What happened to the bodies?" Jake asked in a quiet voice.

My parents sighed, and after an exchange of glances, my mother said, "There is a cavern not far from here with a sinkhole that goes deep into the Earth. We do our ceremonies there, and we leave markers for them. They will be a while, Rabten. I will remain here. Why don't you show them the burial site?"

"As you wish, my love." My father stepped back from the crowd, pausing, and staring at Rosalie's form. He dodged several other turn coats, knelt beside her, and spoke in the same language they chanted in. She rose, and her eyes were wide. "I'll take this one with us. She can offer their prayers, and we can keep the site sacred."

My mother nodded and her attention focused on the chanting people.

My father guided us through the cavern and a short distance back through the nearest tunnel. In the dim glow of our lights, I'd missed the branch on our way in, and my father and Jake needed to duck into it, traversing through tight confines for a few minutes before the tunnel opened into a spacious cavern.

"Watch your step. The trail is narrow, and all the stones here represent someone's grave." My father brightened the light, and to my horror, the trail was narrow, and countless little piles of stone had been stacked in neat rows.

"Are these all my brothers and sisters?"

"Oh, no, my daughter. This is the graveyard of all our people. We were never plentiful in number. There are many who are the graves of your siblings, but this is our history. Every clan would make the journey to here with the remains of our dead, if possible, and commit them to the Earth here." My father guided us through the markers, and he gestured to a hole in the

cavern floor. “That’s the spot. Rosalie, go no closer, but you may offer your prayers here. You need not bow, but you may if you must.”

“You guided me to sacred ground? Me? But why?”

“I remember you, and I forgave you then, as I do here now. Of them all, you were truly horrified by what you witnessed. You took no joy in what befell us. Your soul shook, but you did not break. Your soul is marked, but it is not I who marked you, nor my wife—nor is it marked for the reason my daughter surely believes.”

Damn it. I did not need more complexity in our situation. I already struggled to wrap my head around everything that had happened. Even the journey itself had tested me in some way or another, forcing me to see the better side of those who had been involved with so many deaths.

The entire trip reinforced their status as victims perverted and twisted into committing atrocities.

“I participated,” Rosalie replied in a quiet voice.

“You did, but only because you wished to protect another’s life,” my father conceded. “You were not given much of a choice at all in what you were forced to become. I know that, you know that, and my daughter knows that as well. What she doesn’t understand is that she was the one who marked you, when she still struggled with her first breaths, because you were the only one there who truly wanted nothing to do with the slaughter of my children. Even then, she saw your soul and found it worthy. It wasn’t my mark you saw on her, Karma. It was yours.”

Thanks to my inability to handle water without a fuss and a high risk of drowning, I’d come to accept there was some form of magic about me, although the news the mark had been mine bothered me. “Why would I have done that?”

“She was forced to hold you while the others killed the rest of our litter. Then they abandoned you to die, in part because little Rosalie asked why kill a baby that was going to die anyway? I think, in a way, she saved your life—

because they looked at you, saw you were weak and believed you to be unwell, and decided you weren't worth the effort of killing. You would die on your own, and that was good enough for them."

The story remained the same, yet it changed with the introduction of a little more knowledge. "Well, thank you, Rosalie. I do very much enjoy being alive."

"That was the first and the last lie I ever told," the woman confessed. "I always thought you were such a strong little baby with bright, knowing eyes, so much like the moon."

"Offer your prayers if you would like," my father said. "Giving you this is the least I can do."

"I offered them long ago and every day since. And when the sinners come, my life will be a prayer, one I use to right the wrongs done here. But we will not defile the sacred bones resting below with their filth. We will haul them from this mountain, however long it takes, and leave them out for the birds. And once their bones have been picked clean, we shall grind them to dust and cast them into the flames so that they may never find honor in proper burial. They do not deserve such things."

"You may have to leave such rituals to another, Rosalie. I have plans to entrust you with my daughter's safety when she returns to the United States, to look over her and her husband and their many litters of children, for they will not suffer as we have suffered. I saw you then, and I see you now—and they will need someone who loves children to help, for they will be cursed with many more than they know what to do with given time. But unlike us, their legacy will not be one of grief, but of joy."

Rosalie did not fall to her knees, although she did bow to my father three times. "If I can, it would be my honor."

I wondered how he knew, and I stared at my father with wide eyes, unable to think of a way to ask him.

"My daughter, you wear your soul on your sleeve and your heart shines

bright in your eyes. You, who are so much like me and your mother, have no hope of hiding such feelings from us. You are a being of love and creation, and every step of this journey, you have made certain young Rosalie had a place with you at our fires. It would be stranger if you were not burdened with the worries of what shall come in future days. I will clear the way for her to travel with you to the United States, and I am certain your other companions will help. I can make no such promises for the others, but I will do what I can to make certain justice and mercy walk hand in hand for as many as I can. But I cannot erase their crimes, nor do I wish to. But I can do this for one, so I will.”

Jake captured my hand, gave me a squeeze, and said, “We had been discussing that, but she was worried about how you might react.”

“You will be good for each other.” My father stared in the direction of the hole, and he sighed. “I will not add to the tragedies that have brought me here time and time again. And I will hope that we do not need to return to this cave for many years. May our dead rest in peace knowing that our absence is because we have found life and live it free from the burden of so many deaths.”

That I could get behind. Afraid of the answer but unwilling to let the question fester, I asked, “Will you come to the United States? At least to visit?”

“We will, once this is done and we are certain all our children can rest in true peace. We want to see the world that molded you. We would also like to meet this Richard Murphy once he has finished the important business he is doing.”

“And the souls of his parents?”

“They have been given a fair offer. Should they aide us in eradicating the sinners, their souls will be laid to rest—and we will not prevent them from reincarnating for a second chance to redeem themselves. Their souls will be marked for all eternity, however, until they have done as much good as they

have done ill. They will be a long time freeing themselves of that burden, but that is a deserved and a fair punishment.”

That beat what I had worried they might do. “I think you’ll like Richard’s father-in-law, although I warn you now, you might end up adopted.”

“Adopted? Us?”

I laughed at the absurdity of it all. “He is an old wolf who loves children, and he adores Richard. If you can help his son-in-law, the only acceptable course for him and his mate will likely be adoption. Jake and I are already on notice we likely have another set of parents waiting to meet us. Found family is not a bad thing.”

“No, it’s not. I think we would both enjoy meeting this old wolf. And the rest?”

“I doubt he will at all mind having an entire skulk of foxes at his doorstep seeking attention, although that might be a fun way to introduce everyone. Jake? Mind being the only one on two feet some night when we sneak into his yard as foxes?”

My husband joined me in laughing. “I think he would love it, and I’d be glad to stage the fun sort of ambush. I’ll talk to Mellisa and see what her recommendations are.”

“Then that’s settled. Once this is done, we’ll all go to the United States for a visit. And if you like it, you can stay for a while.”

Only time could heal wounds as deep as theirs, but as long as I had a say in it, they would get all the time they needed.

TWENTY-ONE



She didn't need to witness more death.

WHILE PLAIN, the interior of my parents' refuge was comfortable. The walls were of smoothed, carved stone lacking decorations. Rugs helped to ward off the chill of the rock underfoot, and each one was a work of art. Someone had gone through a great deal of trouble to import luxuries, including modern beds, cookware, and some creature comforts. I questioned how they got electricity to operate their television, although I discovered it was limited to approved Chinese media, all of which were on disc.

I guessed Greenwich hadn't been willing to draw attention to their operations. While I questioned how they had a television that worked, a gaming console to stave off boredom, and thousands of books, they lacked the little things I associated with happiness.

They had no photographs of happier times, they had no knick-knacks proving they'd been new places in the world, nor did they have beautiful things that existed solely to be beautiful.

When I thought about it, I doubted my parents had any idea how to be happy, and it would fall to me and Jake to teach them.

Two days after our arrival, my parents managed to coax out the remaining survivors of my family, of which there were eight couples, and none of them could have children. While I understood their hope, I struggled with the idea of being the source of it. Jake endured even more scrutiny than I did,

especially upon learning we had confirmed, through the use of science, that we could have children.

I made the mistake of teaching them about the ways science might help couples have children when they were not capable of producing any together, allowing families to grow when natural methods were not viable. Considering how my genetics tended to override Jake's, I held the opinion they'd end up with a lot of children very similar to them—but with enough diversity our species might survive.

With work, I believed I might be able to campaign for Fenerec to help their cause.

I would not be able to handle the guilt if science couldn't conquer what love could not.

Five days after our arrival, my father warned us the sinners approached and would arrive within a few hours, and if we were to stage an ambush, the time had come. I'd spent the previous days making plans with Jake, and we'd agreed on one thing: we would shift, and we would solve the problem with our teeth and claws.

I looked forward to fighting over the bodies, giving all witnesses a brutal demonstration of what retribution could look like.

Mellisa would be ready to make use of her magic, squeezing out every ounce of her strength to take out at least one sorcerer before they could strike.

Those seeking redemption armed themselves with every weapon at their disposal, some they provided themselves with the rest coming from the Inquisition. I loaned Rosalie my new gun, warned her it was fully automatic, and told her to go for the kill so she couldn't be surprised later. Jake loaned his gun to my father, gave him the basic safety speech, and warned him to only use it if he had no other choice.

I'd tried to convince my mother to shift once and only once, but I recognized her trauma response, changed my mind, and put her in charge of the rest of our small family, having her find shelter somewhere within the

caverns and tunnels.

She didn't need to witness more death.

In hindsight, I wished my father had gone with my mother, but I understood why he needed to remain.

The sinners expected his presence.

I shifted without incident, and Jake completed his transformation faster than normal. To praise him, I licked his muzzle before ducking my head under his and snuggling into his plush coat. Jake draped his paw over my shoulders until I settled in front of him, and he went to work grooming my fur to perfection. Once satisfied, he let me up, and he herded me in the direction of one of the side tunnels hidden behind an outcropping of stone.

From our vantage, we would spot them before they spotted us.

Those seeking redemption likewise scattered, with some scaling the walls to hide in niches above, niches my father had created to give them a place to stage their ambush. From the ground, nothing appeared to be different, but we all knew better.

During the work, my father took the excess material to where he had cast his many children back to the Earth, spoke a prayer, and tossed the rocks into the depths. A chillingly long time passed before the faint echo of rock clattering against rock made it up through the shaft, exposing that there was something far below.

The last part of the wait dragged, with seconds stretching into minutes and minutes stalling and refusing to turn to hours. In truth, we only waited for about thirty minutes.

The steady thump of footsteps warned us our adversaries approached. Infrequent chatter informed us we dealt with at least two. According to their shadows, there were at least ten of them. Ten would complicate things.

If all ten were sorcerers, the complications could prove lethal to us. I could take out one. Jake could take out one. Rosalie promised she could take out two before I could blink an eye, for she was well versed with guns and

had used one like mine before. Mellisa would take out one.

The rest would give us problems, as I had no idea how our conspirators would behave around those who had led their cult for so long.

They might open fire and litter the ground with corpses, ending the fight before it could begin. They might balk, giving them a chance to utilize their foul magic.

We'd find out soon enough.

As planned, my father waited at the gate, dressed in his modern clothes rather than the tunics and trousers or robes the rest of the family tended to wear. He regarded the group with a neutral expression, not saying a word as they moved closer.

I counted bodies, determining we had a dozen assholes to eliminate. Jake tensed beside me, and he exposed his teeth in a silent snarl.

I longed to chitter my fury, but rather than expose our presence, I waited.

"Have you disposed of her body as ordered?" a man with a deep yet somehow raspy voice asked, and I questioned why he spoke in English.

My father said nothing, although his stare turned baleful.

I appreciated how he lied using silence as his tool of choice, although the shock of their order crashed through me and chilled me to the bone.

They had ordered my father to kill me?

"Rabten," the man warned. "You were given leave of the mountain for one purpose. Have you committed her bones to the Earth?"

My father lifted his left hand and turned his palm to face the ceiling, our signal that we could do with the Greenwich bastards as we saw fit.

Rather than question what the man meant, I decided he would be my prey, and I surged out of my hiding place, closed the distance between us, and closed my teeth around his throat, using my weight to slam him to the side and into several of his companions. With a shake of my head, I snapped the bones in the bastard's neck. To make certain I finished the job, I bit again, jerking my entire body in an effort to remove his head from his shoulders.

Skin, bone, and muscle tore, accompanied by a spray of blood. Satisfied he wouldn't bother me until I had a chance to confirm my kill, I went for a new target. By size and the fit of her robes, I determined her to be a female. She threw her arm up to defend her head and face, and I accepted her offer of an easy place to close my fangs on to, once again jerking my entire body to knock her off balance.

She fell, and I hauled her over the stones before releasing her to aim for my next target, her exposed throat.

Memories of attacking others in such a way roused, along with something far older but sweeter—a woman with golden hair and skin, who had taught me how best to dispatch my prey with my teeth, using dolls better suited for my diminutive size to teach me the theory.

I gave a shake of my head to break her neck and dispel the memories, the old secrets locked in my head.

There would be a better time to pursue them and learn their importance, sometime after the dust settled and the blood dried.

The first blasts of gunfire echoed through the mountain, and after the first shots rang out, more joined in. As I had no interest in becoming a target, I chittered, angled for the nearest bastard still standing, and latched on to his leg and dragged him away from the primary mass of bodies. Bullets ricocheted against stone, but my father lifted his hand higher, and rather than bounce, the projectiles sank into the rock. Some came disconcertingly close to me, but numerous rounds thumped into my victim, who ceased struggling to escape my grasp.

I dropped him, seized the back of his neck, and gave a shake to make certain he wouldn't get up again.

One charred husk, smoking and clothes still aflame, slumped to the ground and illuminated the cavern in a flickering, dying light.

Jake huffed, dropped the body he'd been busy tearing to shreds, and came my way, his ears twisted back.

I chittered, and he responded with a snarl and a snap of his teeth.

I put my paw on the body I'd finished off, issuing another chitter.

Making use of his larger size, he shouldered me off the corpse and showed me the back of his throat, his only warning he'd try to engulf my entire muzzle in his mouth if I pushed my luck.

One day, I might understand why we picked fights right after a hunt, but if he wanted a brawl, I'd be happy to give him one. I went for his nose, landing a rebuking nip before swatting him with a paw.

I took some care to keep from tearing up his beautiful coat, although we'd earn more than a few bites and scratches by the time we finished with each other.

He backed a few paces, charged, and plowed into me, rolling me over to begin his assault, and as always, I rose to the challenge, chittering false threats of doom and destruction. Then I gave it my all, understanding I would lose as usual, all thanks to practice and a few extra pounds of muscle in his favor.



IT TOOK my father grabbing Jake by the back of his neck and my mother, along with several of my aunts, making use of their combined weight to separate us. He snapped his teeth, and I chittered back.

“What has gotten into them?” my mother asked, her tone exasperated.

Mellisa laughed at us, crouched in front of me, and gave my chest a brisk rub. “This is a thing they do after a hunt, and I encourage it. They’re working out their nerves. She’s energetic, and Jake only romps like this right after a hunt, so they take it to extremes. After they shift, you won’t be able to separate them without a great deal of whining. They like to go to the other extreme and indulge in calm activities. Karma, it’s time to settle down. We

need to make certain none of that blood is yours. There were a lot of ricochets before your father softened the rock. Jake, were you hit?”

Jake shook himself off, and after a moment, he presented his hind leg and pointed at a spot with his nose.

The fire witch abandoned me to separate my mate’s fur, searching for the injury. “A graze at worst. The bullet didn’t hit anything important, nor did it get lodged in the muscle. You’ll do. If you can help without nipping your mate, you can help me check her over and groom some of this blood out of her coat.”

Jake turned his head, and he huffed.

I didn’t blame him. I didn’t want to lick the blood of our enemies out of my fur any more than he did.

“I’m sure they don’t taste that bad,” Mellisa muttered, shaking her head. “Rabten? Can you conjure enough water to clean their coats?”

“Of course. Amrita? Would you like to help as well? The children are quite filthy.”

My mother nodded, and she held her hand over my head. A curtain of water crashed down, and she went to work rubbing at my coat, adding more water as needed to get the blood out. My aunts joined in, and I stood still for them, enjoying the attention.

My father tended to Jake, and after a few moments, some of the former cultists scurried up and offered to help. I eyed the group, but while my father hesitated, he nodded and made space for them.

I didn’t expect my parents to remain friends with their enemies, but at least they would, for a time, have some peace.

It would do.



Epilogue: “Your Eminence, why shouldn’t I kill you for this?”

THERE WAS something satisfying about camping out on Charles Desmond’s front step with an entire skulk of foxes heralding in the apocalypse with a chorus of vixen screams. The males of the group hung their heads, as we’d made a variety of threats if we couldn’t indulge in our base instincts and make a little noise.

After what felt like a bazillion hours in the air to make it from Tibet to Seattle, I thought we’d earned some screaming. Jake, not to be outdone, howled and warbled complaints over our ruckus, although we did a good job of drowning him out.

As it was three in the morning and we’d arrived without announcement, it came as no surprise when a dark-haired, disgruntled man in a bathrobe answered the door, his scent tinged with fury.

Following our plan, us screaming females swarmed him, and as I lacked self-preservation, I led the charge, plunked my forepaws on his shoulders, and drove him to the floor. Then I bathed his face with fox slobber, paying back all the times Jake had done the same to me.

My mate warbled his amusement but came to the rescue, stepping all over the Inquisition’s enforcer to shove me back.

With a chorus of excited yips, my family bounded into the Desmond home while the sole human of the group laughed his ass off. “Hello,

Desmond.”

Rosalie would join us soon, but she had to begin paying her penance for her role in Greenwich, which meant as gentle of an interrogation as the Inquisition could give her while appeasing China’s wrath. She would come back to me bruised and perhaps sore but alive and well.

She viewed it as the first steps of seeking true redemption, and she had gone with the Inquisitors with a smile plastered on her face and a skip in her step.

“Your Eminence, why shouldn’t I kill you for this?”

The Shadow Pope of the Inquisition meeting us at the Seattle airport had unnerved me, but he assured me he was present to make sure everyone had arrived from Tibet safe and sound and to personally thank the Chinese delegate for escorting us. Rather than display any concern, the man dodged everyone, headed for the small, dark-haired woman in pajamas coming down the steps, and hugged her. “I’d be sorry for waking you, but the foxes were edgy, Karma wanted to start screaming, and knowing vixens like to scream, I figured I would give the ladies of the skulk an outlet for their energy. It turns out putting a bunch of foxes on a plane for more than ten hours at a time leads to a great deal of fidgeting. These specific foxes like having their feet firmly on the ground.”

“So that mess in China has been sorted?” Wendy asked.

“It’s been sorted, at least however much we’re involved with the sorting. China and Tibet are handling the rest, as the crimes happened and originated on their soil. One of the foxes is Karma, and the rest are her family, who have suffered through a lengthy captivity in Tibet. They need some tender, loving care, and I couldn’t think of anyone better for the job than you. You’ll find they’re skittish, but I expect you can embolden them in short order. I’m sending over every available psychologist I have, so you’ll have plenty of support. You’ll want to use a gentle hand with Jake, but he’s progressing nicely. I earned a growl out of him for being a little too curious about his

mate's conformity. I think we'll have him up to bullying entire packs around within a few years. I want Sara to work with him. He's got a lot to learn and unlearn."

Desmond grunted, but after a moment, he nodded. "And his pack?"

"I've made it clear they won't put up a fuss when you integrate them with Seattle. Once you're done with your personal project, you can bring them both into your pack, but they need the stability while you're doing what you do best. Seattle does not need two Omegas, and if I could give you an entire pack of Omegas, I would. I just don't have them around. I expect Jake and Karma will bolster your numbers well and make your job that much easier. You'll have to share them with the FBI and the black market, but once you're done your other projects, they'll be yours."

The enforcer nodded, and he picked himself up. "All right. Which one of you is Karma?"

I sat and lifted my paw.

"As punishment for screaming on my doorstep, you're staying here until I'm satisfied your mate is properly trained. Wendy, show this fox to her room so she can think about what she's done."

Wendy laughed, came over, and crouched beside me, petting my head. "I wasn't expecting so many people, but I'll come up with something. We have plenty of blankets and pillows even if we don't have enough beds or couches."

I let loose one of my little yips, and as I had lost all self-respect, I whipped my tail back and forth.

"I'll call Matthew and Sara. They have a few extra bedrooms, and it's close enough the foxes can skitter back and forth between our properties if they get separation anxiety," Desmond said, hopping to his feet and heading into a nearby kitchen. "How do you want me to handle this, Elliot?"

"Start with introducing them to Seattle's pack and taking them out on trips to see the local sights. You'll want to take them into the mountains

often. The cities are overwhelming for them, but they can tolerate it for short periods of time. Some of the foxes get quite upset seeing the sky for too long; they've been holed up in a mountain for more years than I care to think about. I'm hoping being on a mountain will be familiar enough to them while they adapt. I'll have renovators come and transform your basement into guest rooms. That is probably going to be the most comfortable for them. If you need an extension for your basement, we can look into it as well. Perhaps a tunnel leading to a new wing? That would give the foxes a safe space while I come up with something better for them. Were you able to find the people I asked about?"

"Yes. They're in the area, and I've met with them once. I'll start the introductions gradually, especially if you think integration may be an issue."

As always, I had more questions than answers, and I wondered who they wanted us to meet and why. Then again, it beat the family drama I had to deal with, as my mother had not known the bastards from Greenwich had ordered my father to kill me as punishment for my survival.

Mellisa believed the sorcerers had made their last fatal mistake with that one terrible order.

Somehow, my father had broken free of his chains, all because of one command he refused to obey, even if it cost him his life.

I still needed to work through my feelings on the matter, as I understood that my father had expected to die for his defiance at the gate leading into his refuge.

Instead, we had slaughtered those who had tormented my family, in cold blood and without remorse.

"After talking with China, I feel that's a wise idea. Don't stress too much about their accommodations for the night. Unlike Fenerec, they're born foxes, and they'll be plenty happy with somewhere warm and safe to sleep. It's a good starting point for adapting them from their old lifestyle."

Desmond raised a brow. "Dare I ask?"

“They’ll tell you when they’re ready, I’m sure. If you decide to adopt the lot of them, be prepared to get into some skirmishes with China over it. Tibet will want them back eventually, as they have a suspiciously high population of people in the region who believe the foxes are what keep the mountains from waking and raining terror and destruction down on their heads—or something like that. When I was on the phone with them, the translator had problems keeping up, especially when the Tibetans were trying to say something. I’ll also be sending a woman over in the morning, assuming she’s feeling better after the rough night she’s surely having. Karma’s attached, and I suspect she’s somehow picked up your tendency to adopt people in need.”

“I don’t see how that’s possible,” Desmond muttered. “But that’s fine. What time can I expect the woman?”

“Rosalie. I’ll have someone bring her around at eleven. That should be long enough for her to be questioned and briefed on her responsibilities. I’ll warn you now. She’s a former member of Greenwich, and she was one of the better ops from my understanding of it. She’s been heavily damaged. The witches I’ve had placed with her agree she is generally a gentle soul who was forced into atrocities. Karma wanted to save her, so I’m bringing her into the Inquisition. It was the only way I could get her out of China. Or keep her alive, for that matter.”

I winced, as China had taken a rather brutal stance regarding the former members of Greenwich. Some would live, but most had faced their death not long after we’d cut the head off the serpent.

My father had requested that each of those facing execution have the option of doing so in the heart of Mount Everest, where their remains might be laid to rest in the familial graveyard as a show of gratitude for ending my family’s nightmare.

China had granted the request, and all of those condemned to die had done so in the place where I had been born and the rest of my litter had died.

I’d witnessed every last suicide, and I’d made the painful decision to

absolve them of their deeds so that they could go to the next life in peace. One day, I might forgive myself for what I hadn't been able to prevent.

“Ah. I'll ask Richard if he can smooth things over in China sometime soon. I'm sure he can. He's got them wrapped around his finger. And the other operatives?”

“Dead. China gave them the option of suicide, which they accepted. You'll have trouble with the fox and wolf over it, I'm sure. They viewed her as a goddess, and he was getting a hefty dose of worship, too. I tried to convince China to pick a different punishment, but there have been too many deaths of children. China could not let it stand, and if they had lived, the remainder of their life would have been bad—bad enough I backed off upon hearing the details. China allowed for mercy, and we're going to have to accept that.”

“Are you going to be staying around?”

“For a few days. I want to see how they settle for myself, and you'll need the help getting so many on the road to recovery. All I can tell you is this: the ones on our turf are already dead, so there's nobody left for you to kill this time. And, according to Mellisa, they were run by a group of sorcerers. They killed off twelve, but have your witches be on guard for any. I'm confident China will eradicate any that may have survived—and that includes any who might carry the genes and were in on the cult. The only promise they granted me is that they will not kill any innocents.”

“With China, that's concession enough,” Desmond conceded. “All right, pups. Let's get you all settled. Wendy, show Karma and Jake their room, and I'll show the rest which rooms are for our kids, set them loose to take up whatever other space they want, and check on the brat. Judging from the lack of screaming, he somehow stayed asleep through the fuss.”

Wendy laughed, gave me a kiss on the head, and waved for me to follow her. “He's awake, but I told him not to worry. He's old enough now he does comprehend English. He can even talk some, using the words you taught him,

which includes fuck.”

I whipped my tail harder, as I loved when the little ones learned something their parents wished they hadn't. I trotted after Wendy, dancing in place while she engaged her mate in a staring contest, the faintest of smiles on her lips.

“Maybe if you were game for another one, we wouldn't have a boy who likes using language I probably shouldn't have slipped on around him at an impressionable age,” Desmond replied, grinning at his wife. “Are you sure we can't have another one?”

“Not with a full house we can't, but maybe if you're nice to me once Richard is done with the project he's working on.”

“I'm going to hold you to that,” Desmond warned before going to work herding everybody upstairs. “Tomorrow comes early, so let's get into bed.”



THE WOMAN and man with golden hair and skin came to the Desmond home, and their presence broke my family. The man took the entire lot of them in hand, reassuring them in the language I'd heard them speak in Tibet, leaving me and Jake with the woman. The memory of the woman teaching me how to kill human prey resurfaced, and I marveled that she had not changed over the years.

I had no recollection of the man.

“Imagine my surprise when I discovered you, a little baby, one of my people from another clan,” she said, prowling around me. “I regret I was unable to arrive in time to save your...”

“Parents,” I replied. “Adoptive parents. The first set of them.”

“Parents, then. We would have, if we could have. Then to find you unwell, malnourished, and barely clinging to life? No fault of theirs, mind

you—they hadn't had you long, and they had no idea what you were. My name is Viola. My husband is Jaden. We had thought your family had perished when the seas had risen and the lands had split. I suppose we had gone one way, and they had gone the other, leaving us in the Americas while they remained in China."

Ah. That explained the extreme reaction.

To my family, the dead had risen from their graves, and it wasn't a matter of meeting someone of the same species, but it was of meeting old friends after a long and painful separation. As Viola and Jaden had already met me, they had known other members of my family had survived, thus preparing them for the reunion. "I remember you, a little. You taught me how to kill."

"Yes. I normally wouldn't have taught a kit that young, but you needed to learn because you would one day be hunted. We couldn't keep you. We got away with it for longer than I thought, but it was difficult. You were skilled at shifting for an infant, and we couldn't afford to keep you with us—you would have been exposed far too soon. It happens sometimes with our young. Some just take to our shapeshifting rather than being nudged to human form and staying there. The fox in you was awake from your birth. I'll confess, I worked a little magic on you at first, to help you forget about your power. Then I found a fanatic who wanted nothing more than a healthy baby. I loathed that woman, but she could do what I could not. She did not do it in a manner I tolerate, but she accomplished the job. I thank her for that."

"She's dead now," I confessed.

"Nothing more than she deserves. I warned her she would reach the end of her rope if she raised a hand against you, because one day, you would retaliate. And I warned her if she hurt you, I would be coming for her. She toed the line sufficiently. How did she die?"

"She killed my pa, and she tried to kill me." To my astonishment, the admission no longer hurt. Startled, I stared at Jake with wide eyes.

As always, he winced at the mention of what my ma had done to me and

my pa.

“I had warned her. I had warned her you would turn on her if she overstepped. I had warned her that I would have the grave of the baby she murdered found. You were blind to it then, but I had marked that one’s soul so others might know of her sins, although I’d limited the mark to our kin. Still, I’m sorry, especially for your pa. The woman was deplorable, but the man was everything she was not. We will set up a shrine for him and wish his spirit well in his next life, that he may find nothing but joy.”

One day, time might lessen the grief of losing my pa. “Thank you. I wasn’t imagining it, then? That you taught me how to kill using dolls?”

“It’s true. I knew, one day, that you would need your fangs and claws, so I taught you how to use them. And then I erased as much of the memories as I could, encouraged you to take up the form of a human infant. You had been slow to grow, another sign you were strongly aligned with your fox. I warned that woman you would be developmentally delayed, but that you would grow strong, healthy, and long-lived. I told her that I could not care for you, and that you were the child of a family member, and that you would be of truly pale skin, like a bright moon, and that your hair would be dark and that your eyes, still blue then, would become a bright golden amber. I promised her beauty and grace, of which you are both. I warned her of your affinity with animals, and that you would always be closest to the fox. I, perhaps, should not have trusted her as much as I did, but I felt my threats would get you to adulthood—and they had. We secured your adoption, and we did our best to keep an eye on you. From a distance, you were alive and healthy, always a little underweight, but that’s how our children often are. You’re filling out, so it seems your male has done that part of his duties correctly.”

I giggled, as Jake enjoyed plying me with food whenever I turned around, often irritating Desmond with his fridge raids. I suspected Desmond postured to get Jake standing up for himself a little more, as the enforcer played at backing off whenever Jake was able to stand firm and growl a warning.

Desmond toed lines with my mate, making sure Jake could stand up for himself while not forcing him to stand in a dominant position.

I had no idea what the end goal was, but I appreciated that Jake recoiled a little less and wasn't stressed with his little displays in the Desmond household.

When Jake needed affection, someone stepped up, and I already saw results in the first day of our stay.

I'd have to find some way to thank the Shadow Pope later.

With a smile, I captured Jake's hand in mine and said, "I was worried I might be like a cuttlefish, doomed to drop over dead after having an entire litter of children, leaving Jake to be a beleaguered father of a bazillion foxes, all just like me."

My mate scowled at me. "Cuttlefish again?"

Across the living room, not far from the rest of my family, Desmond laughed.

Viola joined me in giggling. "I can understand where you might get that idea, but no. You'll go forth and multiply, albeit you'll go forth and multiply every thirty to fifty years on average. You might go back into your reproductive cycle again earlier, but that depends on your mate and how persistent he is about wanting another litter. After your first litter, you will find yourself blessed without cycling. You'll know you're entering your reproductive cycle again when you have to worry about menstruating again. We'll have another litter in a few years."

I braced for the worse. "How many survive?"

"One or two of six to eight. We lose most of them in the first week, and we give them their rites and bury them—and we don't tell our children how many siblings they would have had if life were a little kinder to us. They know if they meet others like us they won't be able to have children."

"Like my family. My parents are the only ones who can have children."

"That's right. We're a generation younger than your parents, and our

generation is the absolute last able to have any children at all. But your wolf gives the rest of us hope. I'll be sending my children out to hunt unmated wolves, as your wolf is good for you—and we can cope with the issue of the wolf spirits.”

That led me back to one of the cases connected to Greenwich: little Jacob. “Were you the one who killed those men in Pennsylvania?”

She smiled. “Caught me, did you? How'd you guess it was me?”

“You killed like a fox because you are a fox—and the forensics team identified the bodies hadn't been killed in quite the same way as the other cases. Did you rescue Jacob?”

“In a way. Greenwich was hunting him, and I shifted to my fox and sent him scurrying out of the area, playing as a bigger, meaner predator. I meant him no harm, but I needed him to leave so I could deal with those hunting him.”

“And the gunfire under the bridge?”

“I started my hunt as a human, and I staged the shooting in such a way where someone might believe a small child might be the one hunted. Then I herded my victims into the gully and finished them off there. They deserved their fate—and I have spoken with your Inquisition about my kills. It turns out I will be receiving a nice check for my efforts. We're also being paid for the time we had you as an infant, keeping you safe from Greenwich.”

“Thank you.” At a loss for what else to say, I stared at where my parent and family still wept, converged around Jaden. “Why aren't they swarming you, too?”

“Oh, they will eventually. Jaden is better at the emotional stuff than I am. I'm the cold-blooded killer of our pairing, and he's the sensitive heart, much like your mate is the sensitive one. We tend to partner up that way. It makes for a better relationship, especially over the years. Jaden suggested I be the one to teach you because we're alike in spirit. We did plenty of crying over you, although it's unlikely you remember that. We'd given you enough

formula for you to be properly fed, quite possibly for the first time in your life, so you'd slept while we'd worked through our feelings on it. We'll have our turn as well, but right now, they need us to be calm so they can become calm."

"How long has it been since you've seen them?"

"Millions of years. We don't count the passage of time much. We've been awake for a few thousand years. This era was too interesting to sleep through. Your parents are going to want and need help with their next litter, I'm sure. We've been briefed on the abuses they've endured, and we know more about how to be parents than they do at this point. And when you have your first litter, we'll be around to help as well. The first years are the hardest and the longest. Infancy is painfully long, and it's quite difficult to hide, so we have to move around often. But I think you'll be fine. This area is large enough you can spend a few months in each roost with little risk of people clueing in. Or you can put the infants in our care while you're out and about. There are ways to handle it. Once they're old enough, they do grow closer to a human rate, albeit slower."

I once again braced for bad news and asked, "How old should our children be before they date?"

"Once infancy is over, fifteen to sixteen years is usually old enough to reach general maturity. We're slow growing and hormonal, but I joined with Jaden fairly young. You were plenty old enough to decide for yourself what you wanted to do with your life. Think of it as battling your hormones for longer than normal, especially once your fox resurfaced. You and your mate haven't done anything wrong. You just went through adolescence twice, once as a human, and once as a fox—and that's enough to rattle anybody. Your children won't have the same problems because you'll be there to surface their foxes when they start human adolescence, so they'll be mature by an appropriate age. We target eighteen for ours, and it works well enough—and we falsify their birth certificates after they start departing their infancy stage.

We'll teach you how to do it, and I suppose the Inquisition will help as needed. They seem willing to accommodate our circumstances. They're going to check over our paperwork to make certain we won't be scrutinized later. They're used to dealing with people who live for longer than humans."

Well, we'd have to do a lot of talking about it, but her answers offered some comfort. With luck, we wouldn't have as much of the grief and healthy children. But, if we followed the sad history of my kind, we'd deal with it for the sake of those who survived. "I'm not going to handle losing any of them well."

"None of us do. We have a lot of support. There's two hundred of us scattered around the United States, and we all go through it—and that is excluding our children, who have been warned they won't be able to procreate without taking steps. But I think I'll set my little ones off to hunt wolves. The wolves I've seen so far are fine specimens, and they might be able to handle us at our worst."

"They don't deserve us at our best if they can't handle us at our worst?" I guessed.

"Exactly so. And don't look so alarmed, Jake. I promise you, the best is yet to come, and you've had your fill of the worst of it. If we have any say into it, you'll find your days full of joy—and fox teeth, if you don't happen to jump high enough when Karma wants something."

Jake laughed, and to my relief, he relaxed beside me. "I think we'll be fine."



ONLY ONE OBSTACLE came between me, Jake, and our happily ever after, and it involved the situation with his family and pack. As promised, Desmond introduced us to Seattle's pack leader, who was mated to an Omega

like Jake and lived next door. Within ten minutes of meeting him, my fox decided Sanders would do.

Sara may as well have been yet another star hung in my fox's sky.

Desmond made it clear we'd be coming to his pack after we were settled and he finished attending to some business, which amused Sanders. With the posturing out of the way, the pack transfer went better than I expected, although whatever Sanders did dropped my mate to the floor.

Fortunately for my sanity, Desmond had been ready, catching him under his arms and lowering him to the floor. "He'll be fine, Karma. He's just sensitive. His file in the Inquisition made it clear he's a fainter during pack transfers—or at the very least, very wobbly." The enforcer grinned at me. "Unlike you, who just stared at Sanders expecting something to happen and you completely failed to notice for a solid minute."

"It took her that long for the bond to stabilize enough for her to start hearing the wolves," Sanders reported, shaking his head and staring at my mate. "With him out of the way for the moment, let me see if I understand this. You want me to host the Washington Alphas, who essentially did the same that happened to Richard but non-violently?"

"It was accidental, Sanders," Desmond replied. "They assumed their pup was dominant because they're dominant, and it never occurred to them that their people-pleasing submissive son could possibly be anything other than a dominant. Now he's an Omega, and I'm expecting good results after he's with you for a while. Then I'll train him in enforcement and use him ruthlessly to increase puppy survival rates. Karma will shake out as a good general enforcer when they aren't working with the FBI rescuing Normal kids. I've already discussed the situation with the Inquisition regarding their new job; you'll get them for two months before Jake's evaluated for if he's stable enough for active duty."

I blinked. "Wait. If Jake's stable enough?" Pointing at myself, I raised a brow.

“Karma, you’re fine. Mellisa evaluated you in Tibet. You handled yourself with grace and professionalism, used good judgment, and passed all her basic tasks. Jake’s hesitating.”

I stared at my mate, who was still on the ground. “Should we just leave him there?”

Desmond shrugged. “He’ll be fine. I mean, if you want to have some fun with him, we can stage him on your lap and be dramatic about it.”

Laughing, I got down on the floor. “I’m never passing up on an opportunity to witness Jake come around in a vulnerable position with me. Don’t be silly.” With help from the two Alphas, we situated Jake so his head was nestled on my lap. “He hesitated?”

Joining me on the floor, Desmond nodded. “According to her, he initially froze during the ambush. She thinks part of it was being startled by how you made a decision and followed through with your plan. He delayed long enough he only got in one kill versus your two. He should have been a kill ahead of you with his training, although you may have tied. Mellisa mentioned you were quite efficient at dispatching your prey.”

“Is it because he’s an Omega now?”

“It might be.”

“We’ll sort it out. As long as one of us is swift on the draw, if he needs a little more time, it should be fine. I used to be the slow and methodical one compared to his swift reaction times, so I’ll step up if he has to work out any bad habits.” Tilting my head to the side, I began the process of counting howling and warbling wolves in my head. “It’s a big pack.”

“We are. We have a lot of Normals in it, too—I bring the mates of my wolves in as soon as they’re ready, and our witches are also in the pack. You’ll start picking up on them soon enough. Jake’s sensitive, so he got plowed; it’s the largest pack he’s been in by far, and he wasn’t prepared for the interest and greeting. Don’t fret, though. The pack was briefed on his situation, so he’ll be wrapped in a nice warm blanket along with his wolf

until he settles. I've already got a few wolves who have volunteered to keep an eye on him. We have to do the same for Sara."

The woman in question raised her hand and waved. "We're very bad about putting everyone else first and getting lost in the noise. When I start getting lost, somebody tells Matthew or Desmond, and I get what I need, which is usually to be particularly submissive. I'm put at the back of the pack rankings for a while, so everyone takes turns standing guard until I recharge my battery. And if I go the other way, Desmond suggests I pick a fight with my mate and take over the pack for a while."

"She's gotten quite good at hostile takeovers of the pack," Sanders admitted in a rueful tone. "We're still working on her going to the submissive wolves on her own for attention. You'll have similar problems with Jake, but Wendy is submissive enough she can take care of him when he needs to be sensitive. When do you want me to bring them back to your place?"

"Keep them for three or four days. I'll arrange for the Thomas family to visit, and they can have a chance to clear the air. The foxes should be fine without her for a few days. There are a bunch more of them coming in, and at this rate, I'm going to have to send some over here. Once I'm satisfied the Thomas Alphas can come over here and play nice, I'll bring them over. I'm going to referee Karma's family tearing strips out of them. Sorry, Karma, but you don't need to witness that. Mellisa's orders."

The true ruler of Seattle was Mellisa, and she reigned with an iron fist. The one time Desmond had tried to overstep his bounds, she had warned him he had a choice of backing off or being shoved into a silver cage until he changed his mind.

Desmond had decided against spending time in a silver cage.

Sanders joined us on the floor, as did Sara. "All right, Karma. You can wake your mate up. It's a good chance to see how he reacts."

I began with toying with Jake's hair, and when that didn't get the result I wanted, I flicked his ears. While it took a minute, he roused, blinking up at

me in a state of confusion.

“You fainted,” I announced with glee. “You swooned right into Desmond, and because he adores you, he caught you in his arms. Just like a princess.” I worked my fingers into his hair and made a mess of it. “Apparently, you can’t handle the adoration of so many wolves.”

“Damn it,” he muttered, and he draped an arm over his eyes. “Next time, I’m just sitting on the ground during pack transfers.”

I laughed, shoved his arm out of the way, and wiggled underneath him until I could give him a kiss. “You’ll survive. We should shift and go steal a deer from Desmond’s woods.”

Desmond got up, flung his hands in the air, and headed for the door. “Just bring back anything you don’t eat so it can be put in the freezer. If you don’t have space for their spoils, Matthew, bring over the extras. Are you out of paper?”

“I just got some, so I should be able to handle their attack on your stock. Are you going to put on your fur coat and play with them?”

“I’ll talk with Wendy and see if she wants to hunt. You’re welcome to come if you’d like, Sara.”

The woman whooped, pivoted, and bolted for the stairwell.

“I think she wants,” Sanders replied, snickering at his mate’s antics. “I’ll hold down the fort and keep an eye on your foxes until you’re done hunting. Are your herds going to survive the lot of them?”

“No, but I’ve already put in an order for replacements. The Inquisition will relocate excess deer from elsewhere after they pass their health checks.” Desmond eyed me. “No more trouble than you can handle.”

I grinned at him, appreciating that he understood I’d cause trouble because I could. “Sure.”

“Kids,” he muttered before heading out the door and heading off in the direction of his home.



A WEEK of peace did us both a world of good, and for a change, my fox had no interest in ripping off Pauline Thomas's face when she stepped into the Desmond home. She focused on Jake's father, and she did the mental equivalent of whipping her tail back and forth in delight at seeing the man again.

Jake sat on the couch, his entire body tense. I lounged on Desmond's chair, having established myself as the current queen of the sitting room.

As I had a sense of humor, recently honed by dealing with other Fenerec in high number, I fished out my new set of keys from my pocket and tossed them to Jake's father.

With a laugh, he caught them. "Out back once the niceties are over?"

"Sounds good."

Either emboldened by the invitation to serve as a practice dummy or he understood my fox adored him, he came over and dropped a kiss on my forehead. "If you're going to beat the snot out of the wife today, try to limit the bloodshed. Your mother tenderized her verbally before taking a round with her as a fox. Your father refereed with Desmond and Sanders keeping an eye on things. The air has been cleared, so try to play nicely if you can."

Already tired of my mate's nervousness over the situation, I went in for the kill. "Six in a litter is not uncommon. You can pay penance through the babysitting of infants who stay infants for ten or more years."

Jake stared at me with wide eyes.

"I accept your terms. Give a call when you need us, and depending on the situation, we'll either come out to you or take the little ones to our place by private charter. I'll send over Mason whenever he's needed as well. I'm sure Lilith would love to come, too."

With future childcare secured, I engaged Jake's mother in a staring

contest. “I’m meaner than my mother and father combined, but they have millions of years of experience each. We can do this the hard way. Alternatively, you can begin paying your penance through the adoption of families in need while traveling the world to do good and meet all the families you’re helping. That should adjust your attitude sufficiently. You can even help with the childcare, but I’m armed with parents, and I’m willing to use them.”

After a moment, the woman nodded. “Good. Now, what’s this about Jake being an Omega?”

“That’s my fault, because you didn’t realize or understand he was a submissive. I understand that’s not truly your fault, but the only way to fix him was to put him in a better position. Apparently, that’s a fox thing. Since being a submissive was tearing him apart, I fixed it. Now he’s an Omega, and he’s getting back on his feet.”

“Why not an Alpha?” she asked, tilting her head to the side.

I shrugged. “If he was suited for being an Alpha, he’d be one by now. He had every opportunity to shine as a young dominant. That’s just not his gig. It’s mine. He’ll be the calming influence. I’ll be the gun or sword, whichever is needed. Or, I suppose, a swift kick to the face. He tried his best to make you happy, and it tore him apart. I just didn’t understand what I am and how I could help him—but I was working on it the whole time, I guess.” As I couldn’t afford to back down, nor could I give her an opportunity, I borrowed one of Desmond’s tricks, which involved appearing to be as comfortable and relaxed as possible while on his throne.

The battle of wills lasted a few minutes, with Jake’s tension rising to the point my fox wanted to revert to her old ways and bite a few chunks out of Pauline’s face.

Finally, she heaved a sigh. “Are you going to found your own pack?”

The thought of me running a pack triggered a fit of laughter so intense I fell off the chair and beat the floor with my fist. Even my fox backed off on

wishing to show aggression at the thought of being the one in charge.

“I think that’s a no, babe,” Jake’s father said, and he cleared his throat, probably so he wouldn’t join me laughing. “Are you all right, Karma?”

I swallowed my mirth, crawled back on to Desmond’s chair, and struggled to regain my lost dignity. “I’m fine, thank you. To answer your question, Pauline, no. I’m not. We’re going to join forces with Desmond, and he can deal with the bullshit while we handle the dirty work.”

According to Pauline’s expression, she had entered her personal nightmare.

Desmond came into the room with Wendy, and both regarded me with matching expressions informing me I’d done something to earn their ire—if I didn’t explain myself immediately and to their satisfaction.

“What? It’s true. Once Jake finishes learning from Sara, we’re joining forces. You’re skilled at handling bullshit with ease and grace, and let’s face it, I’m skilled at the dirty work. You’re brainy, I’m brawny.”

“No, you’re scrawny and in need of lunch,” Desmond replied, shaking his head. “Wendy? If you take care of the pups, I’ll show the Thomases to the guest bedroom so they can get settled. All I ask is that when you take your adventures outside, nobody gets killed and all injuries are limited to what I can handle with my first aid kit. Sanders will entertain the skulk of foxes until dinner, and by then, I expect everyone to play nicely. Pauline, Sebastian, you’ll find Karma’s parents are completely different people in my home, which is why you were introduced at Sanders’s guest home. The entire family has been traumatized, so I am expecting everyone to be nice and cuddling by dinner. You can be bruised and sore, but everyone will be ready and able to cuddle by dinner. I am hoping I can work with the foxes through your pack, as you do have some excellent submissives. The American foxes have a lot of single members who are interested in meeting with single Fenerec, and now that we know that there shouldn’t be any difficulties with interspecies relations, it’s a good start. We may also need to start asking around for

pairings who are willing to serve as sperm or egg donors for the bonded foxes. Yes, you screwed up with Jake, but you can more than make up for it helping Karma's family escape from extinction and give the American foxes hope of a future, too—they're only a generation away from extinction, too."

Pauline nodded. "We can discuss that, and I'm sure we'll have no problems finding donors within the pack—and with the numbers of children they have at one time, they'll need the pack helping to care for the children." Her attention fixed on her son. "We truly had no idea you were submissive, Jake. For that, we're both sorry."

Jake glanced my way, and his uncertainty pained me.

I offered him a smile. "Would you like us to clear out for a few minutes so you can be emotional without an audience?"

At his nod, I got up, went to him, and gave him a kiss. "Just shout if you need me. I won't be far. Desmond? You can help me warm up for some kicking. I'm out of practice, and I'd rather kick the keys out of his hand rather than kick his face."

"You better come referee, Wendy. We'll worry about feeding the pups a little later. They probably won't starve. Howl if you need us, Jake—hell, howl just to rile your mate up. She's fun when she's defending her delicate little flower."

"Funny, Desmond," Jake replied in his driest voice.

"Once you're done kissing, making up, and running me out of tissues, come on out back. You can watch your old man fight with your woman while I fire up the grill."

"I thought I was cooking," Wendy said.

"You can fight with her, too, if you want. We might end up eating just meat if you're not helping, though."

Wendy eyed me. "We could spar. I've done some kickboxing before."

"Sure, but if you kick my ass, you have to make me deer stew tomorrow." In reality, I'd throw the match if it won me deer stew, and judging from her

raised brow, she knew it.

“Only if you make me work for it.”

“You’re on.” Once outside and circling the house, I eyed the house with its rose trellises and bushes surrounding it. “He’ll be okay?”

“Your mate will be just fine,” Desmond promised, patting my shoulder. “He’s got what he’s really needed, which includes your acceptance, their apology, and proper hope for the future. His parents leading the charge for finding egg and sperm donors for your family will be a good start. I’m not expecting everything to be sunshine and roses, but this is the healing he needs. And as for your family? Well, I suspect they’ll have all the time they need to heal.”

“That just leaves me.”

Desmond snorted before smacking the back of my head. “You’re a little idiot. You went hunting for old secrets and opened the door for a bright new future. How much more healing do you need to do? I mean, beyond putting a little more meat on those bones of yours, but I’m convinced we can fix that with time.”

“Assuming we can keep our woods stocked with deer,” Wendy quipped. “It’ll be a challenge.”

I laughed because it was true. “If you didn’t make such good deer stew, we wouldn’t be picking your forest clean.”

Wendy smiled, linked her arm with mine, and dragged me around the house. “If you beat him in a fight, I’ll dig out the moose from the freezer and show you a real stew.”

I twisted around, stared Charles Desmond in the eyes, and pointed at him. “You are going down.”

“Is there nothing a puppy won’t do for food?”

If accepting my rank as a puppy got me moose stew, I would do so with pride. “Ask me after I win.”

Wendy laughed. “He’s going to beat the snot out of you, Karma—but

don't worry, I'll nurse you back to health with my moose stew. Technically, you win either way. If you lose, it just hurts a little more first. Next time, you'll try harder not to lose. It hurts less that way."

I staggered, as I struggled to imagine her picking a fight with her mate in the first place. "You actually fight with him?"

The woman dragged me to the back before releasing me, gesturing to a clear spot of grass near their koi pond. "Every chance I get. That's half the fun. But don't tell anyone. I don't think they have the fortitude to realize I can beat him half the time."

"A wise man does not let his wife win," Desmond informed me in a solemn tone. "I make her earn it. Let this be a lesson for you, Karma. Submissive doesn't mean weak."

"I just prefer to follow, and there's nothing wrong with that." She smiled at me. "But you'll find out the truth of that soon enough with your Jake."

Yes, I would.

Wendy clapped her hands together. "Let's work out some of these nerves, shall we? Do try to keep up, Karma. At least give us some good sport while your mate gets his feet back under him."

While convinced I'd bitten off more than I could chew, I stretched and prepared for one hell of a fight. "I might regret this, but if I can have moose stew, I'll regret it with a smile. What are the rules?"

"Don't die," Desmond replied, joining me in doing some basic stretches.

Oh, boy. "Can we add 'avoid the face' to the list of rules?"

"Sure, why not? On your guard, Karma. Ready or not, here I come."



About the Author

RJ BLAIN suffers from a Moleskine journal obsession, a pen fixation, and a terrible tendency to pun without warning.

When she isn't playing pretend, she likes to think she's a cartographer and a sumi-e painter.

In her spare time, she daydreams about being a spy. Should that fail, her contingency plan involves tying her best of enemies to spinning wheels and quoting James Bond villains until she is satisfied.

[RJ also writes as Susan Copperfield, Bernadette Franklin, Audrey Greene, G.P. Robbins, and Lilith Daniels.](#) Visit RJ and her pets (the Management) at thesneakykittycritic.com.



FOLLOW RJ & HER ALTER EGOS ON BOOKBUB:

[RJ BLAIN](#)

[SUSAN COPPERFIELD](#)

[BERNADETTE FRANKLIN](#)

[AUDREY GREENE](#)

[G.P. ROBBINS](#)

LILITH DANIELS